

# Lithuania

Rebellious, quirky and vibrant, Lithuania (Lietuva) is Europe's best-kept secret. Shoved successively between Russian pillar and Nazi post, tenacious little Lithuania stunned the world when it played David and Goliath with the might of the Soviet Union – and won its independence just over a decade ago. Today the nation that vanished from the maps of Europe is back with a vengeance: it's part of the EU, was the first of the 25 EU players to give the European Constitution a stamp of approval and is a fully fledged 'n' fighting partner of NATO – home no less to four F-16 military alliance jet fighters used to police Baltic skies.

Politicians have come and gone, including the young, tenacious Rolandas Paksas, who wooed electors with big talk of a land of plenty and flamboyant aerial stunts in a small plane – until his fall from grace on corruption charges in 2004. Now the country is back in the hands of a couple of old stalwarts who, age aside (we're talking 74 for the prime minister, 80 for the president), lend little Lithuania a definite air of confidence.

This is a country with a colourful history, once boasting an empire stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea. Its raw pagan roots fuse with Catholic fervour – the Polish inheritance that sets it apart from its Baltic brothers – to create a land where Catholics and Orthodox mingle happily in the forest to pick wild berries and mushrooms from nature's altar. Its capital, Vilnius, is an incredibly small place (can this really be a capital city?) with astonishing contrasts – eerie shadowy courtyards, eccentric artist community, awesome arts and beautiful baroque. Its natural treasures – forests, lakes, a magical spit of sand and a soggy delta – shimmer, while its oddities – the Hill of Crosses and a Soviet sculpture park – add a flavour found nowhere else.

## FAST FACTS

- **Area** 65,303 sq km
- **Birthplace of** composer and painter Čiurlionis
- **Capital** Vilnius
- **Country code** ☎ 370
- **Departure tax** none
- **Famous for** causing the USSR to collapse; Europe's largest baroque old town
- **Money** Lithuanian litas; €1 = 3.45Lt; UK£1 = 5.04; US\$1 = 2.84Lt
- **Population** 3.4 million
- **Visa** most nationalities don't need one; see p391 for more information.



## HIGHLIGHTS

- **Vilnius** (p287) Get lost by day in the cobbled heart of this beautiful baroque capital; dine come dusk on an atmospheric street terrace.
- **Curonian Spit** (p362) Gaze in awe at the drifting sands of Nida's golden Parnidis Dune (p368); cycle through pine to Juodkrantė (p364) and sail to Venice (p370).
- **Hill of Crosses** (p341) Plant a cross on this awe-inspiring mountain of crosses; visit the chapel of the neighbouring papal-inspired monastery.
- **Palanga** (p355) Party like mad in Palanga: drink and dance the night away then watch the sun rise over its pier.
- **Aukštaitija National Park** (p320) Go boating and berrying in this serene land of lake and forest; fish for your supper and sleep in a little wooden house.

## ITINERARIES

- **Three Days** Devote two days to Vilnius (see p290) and spend the third day in Trakai (catch your own lunch and sleep in style on the lakeshore).
- **One Week** Combine a few days in Vilnius with day trips to Trakai and Druskininkai's Soviet sculpture park, plus a couple of days canoeing in the Aukštaitija National Park or dune dancing on the Curonian Spit.
- **Two Weeks** Vilnius to Klaipėda: explore Smiltynė, the gateway to the Curonian Spit. Explore the dunes of Nida, sweat it out in a seaside sauna in Smiltynė, then head down the mainland to Rusnė and explore the backwaters of the Nemunas Delta by boat. Double back, go to the eerie Hill of Crosses via the Orvydas Garden, the Soviet missile base and Lake Plateliai. Back to Vilnius via Kaunas.

## CURRENT EVENTS

Valdas Adamkus (b 1926) made Lithuania's EU dream come true. Smashed at the polls in 2003 by a man 30 years younger, the 80-year-old Lithuanian émigré and former US citizen was re-elected president for a five-year term in June 2004. His return followed the impeachment of charismatic young dynamo Rolandas Paksas, whose alleged dealings with Russian mafia served as a harsh reminder of Lithuania's relative immaturity.

## HOW MUCH?

- **Cup of coffee** 1.70Lt to 5Lt
- **Taxi fare** 1Lt/km to 1.5Lt/km
- **Public transport ticket** 1.40Lt
- **Bicycle hire** 6/35Lt per hour/day
- **Sauna** 80Lt to 150Lt

## LONELY PLANET INDEX

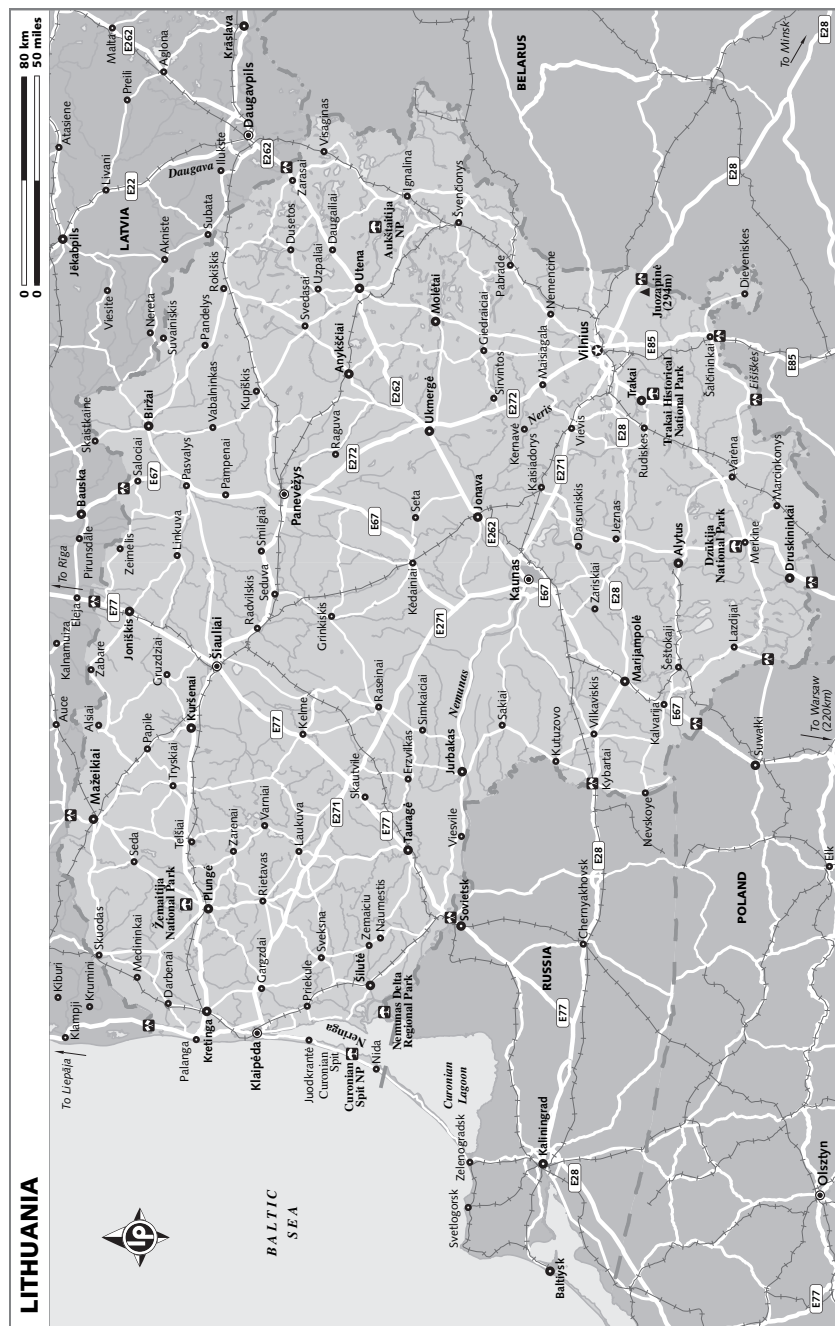
- **Litre of petrol** 2.6Lt
- **Litre of bottled water** 2.5Lt
- **50cl bottle of Švyturys beer** 2Lt
- **Souvenir T-shirt** 20Lt to 35Lt
- **pancake** 3.45Lt

In a country where public accountability is scarcely more than a decade old (not to mention where everyone led a different life pre-1991), the past is sensitive: in January 2005 a national newspaper exposed Lithuanian foreign minister Antanas Valionis as a former officer in the KGB reserves, prompting a parliament inquiry into his Soviet past.

True to form, bold Lithuania unabashedly ratified the EU constitution in November 2004, becoming the first of the 25 EU member countries to do so. Giving the green light with practically no political debate or public referendum, the move highlighted the nation's over-riding eagerness for all things European, including the euro, which many Lithuanians are gagging for.

Former president and current Prime Minister Algirdas Brazauskas (b 1932), picked by the president and backed by the 141-seat *seimas* (parliament) to form a government in late 2004, is one of its staunchest supporters. Leader of the Communist Party in Soviet Lithuania, the wily leftist politician subsequently reinvented himself as Social Democrats party leader and currently heads a power-sharing coalition with a clutch of other political parties, including the young Labour Party, formed in 2003.

Since joining NATO, Lithuania has been the first former Soviet republic to host the military alliance. It has also taken it upon itself to mediate between old East and West. This was made quite clear, to the disconcertion of some fellow EU members, during



Ukraine's Orange Revolution in January 2005, when Adamkus got heavily involved in negotiations with the country's disputing presidential contenders.

## HISTORY

A powerful state in its own right at its peak in the 14th to 16th centuries, Lithuania subsequently fell under the Polish then Soviet yoke. Bar a brief interwar period of independence, Lithuania was not independent again until 1991. Kaunas' Military Museum of Vytautas the Great and Vilnius' National Museum cover the whole span of Lithuania's history.

## Tribal Testosterone

Human habitation in the wedge of land that makes up present-day Lithuania goes back to at least 9000 BC. Trade in amber started during the Neolithic period (6000 to 4500 years ago), providing the Balts – the ancestors of modern Lithuanians – with a ready-made source of wealth when they arrived on the scene from the southeast some time around 2000 BC.

Two centuries on, it was this fossilised pine resin and the far-flung routes across the globe its trade forged – brilliantly explained in Palanga's Amber Museum – that prompted a mention of the amber-gathering *aesti* on the shores of the Baltic Sea in *Germania*, a beast of a book about Germanic tribes outside the Roman Empire written in 1009. The same year Lithuania was mentioned for the first time in written sources (the *Kvedlinburgh Chronicle*) as the place where an archbishop called Brunonus was struck on the head by pagans in Litae (Latin for Lithuania). Its 1000th anniversary will be celebrated in Vilnius, where an entire palace is being rebuilt brick by brick to mark the event; visit the site for the full story.

By the 12th century Lithuania's peoples had split into two tribal groups: the Samogitians (lowlanders) in the west and the Aukštaitiai (highlanders) in the east and southeast. Around this time a wooden castle was built atop Gediminas Hill in Vilnius.

## Medieval Mayhem

In the mid-13th century Aukštaitiai leader Mindaugas unified Lithuanian tribes to create the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, of which he was coronated king in 1253 at Kernavė,

## TIP OFF

To keep abreast of the latest current events, surf the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' website ([www1.urm.lt](http://www1.urm.lt)) – an invaluable, reliable and well-organised news source.

the 'Pompeii of Lithuania'. Mindaugas accepted Catholicism in a bid to defuse the threat from the Teutonic Order – Germanic crusaders who conquered various Prussian territories, including Memel (present-day Klaipėda). Unfortunately neither conversion nor unity lasted very long; Mindaugas was assassinated in 1263 and Christianity rejected. Vilnius did reap its first cathedral, though, from this sacred decade of peace.

In 1290 Lithuania was reunified and under Grand Duke Gediminas (1316–41) its borders extended south and east into modern-day Belarus. After Gediminas' death two of his sons shared the realm: in Vilnius, Algirdas pushed the southern borders of Lithuania past Kyiv, while Kęstutis – who plumped for a pretty lake island in Trakai as a site for his castle – fought off the Teutonic Order. After Algirdas' death in 1377, Kęstutis drove Algirdas' son and successor, Jogaila, from Vilnius and made himself sole ruler of Lithuania. But in 1382 Jogaila captured Kęstutis and son Vytautas, and threw the pair into prison (where Kęstutis died).

With the Teutonic threat increasing, Jogaila found himself in a quandary. His Orthodox princes advised alliance with Moscow, the rising Russian power in the east, and conversion to Orthodoxy, while his pagan princes suggested conversion to Catholicism and alliance with neighbouring Poland.

Jogaila's decision was a watershed in Eastern European history. In 1386 he wed Jadwiga, crown princess of Poland, to become Władysław II Jagiełło of Poland and forge a Lithuanian-Polish alliance that would last 400 years. The Aukštaitiai were baptised in 1387 and the Samogitians in 1413, making Lithuania the last European country to accept Christianity.

## Glory Days

Jogaila patched things up with Vytautas, who became Grand Duke of Lithuania on condition that he and Jogaila share a

common policy. The decisive defeat of the Teutronics by their combined armies at Grünwald (in modern-day Poland) in 1410 ushered in a golden period of prosperity, particularly for its capital Vilnius, which saw its legendary Old Town born.

Vytautas ('the Great') extended Lithuanian control further south and east. By 1430 when he died, Lithuania stretched beyond Kursk in the east and almost to the Black Sea in the south, creating one of Europe's largest empires. Nowhere was its grandeur and clout better reflected than in 16th-century Vilnius, which, with a population of 25,000-odd, was one of eastern Europe's biggest cities. Fine late-Gothic and Renaissance buildings sprang up, and Lithuanians such as Žygimantas I and II occupied the Polish-Lithuanian throne inside the sumptuous Royal Palace. In 1579 Polish Jesuits founded Vilnius University and made the city a bastion of the Catholic Counter Reformation. Under Jesuit influence, baroque architecture also arrived.

### Polonisation & Partitions

But Lithuania gradually sank into a junior role in its partnership with Poland, climaxing with the formal union of the two states (instead of just their crowns) at the Treaty of Lublin in 1569 during the Livonian War with Muscovy. Under the so-called *Rzeczpospolita* (Commonwealth), Lithuania played second fiddle to Poland. Its gentry adopted Polish culture and language, its peasants became serfs and Warsaw usurped Vilnius as political and social hub.

A century on it was Russia's turn to play tough. In 1654 Russia invaded the *Rzeczpospolita* and snatched significant territory from it. By 1772 the *Rzeczpospolita* was so weakened that the Prussia-Brandenburg state of Russia, Austria and Prussia simply carved it up in the Partitions of Poland (1772, 1793 and 1795–96). Most of Lithuania went to Russia, while a small chunk around Klaipėda in the west went to Prussia.

### Power to the People

While neighbouring Estonia and Latvia were governed as separate provinces, Russian rule took a different stance with rebellious Lithuania.

Vilnius had quickly become a refuge for Polish and Lithuanian gentry dispos-

sessed by the region's new Russian rulers and a focus of the Polish national revival, in which Vilnius-bred poet Adam Mickiewicz was a leading inspiration. When Lithuanians joined a failed Polish rebellion against Russian rule in 1830 and 1831, Tsarist authorities clamped down extra hard. It shut Vilnius University, closed Catholic churches and monasteries and imposed Russian Orthodoxy. Russian law was introduced in 1840 and the Russian language was used for teaching. From 1864 books could only be published in Lithuanian if they used the Cyrillic alphabet, while publications in Polish (spoken by the Lithuanian gentry) were banned altogether.

In 1861 Lithuanian (and Russian) peasants were emancipated: power to the people! National revival became a hot trend in the 19th and early 20th century, the rapid industrialisation of Vilnius and other towns simply lending nationalist drives more clout. Vilnius became an important Jewish centre during this period, Jews making up around 75,000 of its 160,000-strong population in the early 20th century to earn it the nickname 'Jerusalem of the North'.

### Independence

Ideas of Baltic national autonomy and independence had been voiced during the 1905 Russian revolution, but it was not until 1918 that the restoration of the Independent State of Lithuania was declared. During WWI Lithuania was occupied by Germany and it was while still under German occupation on 16 February 1918 that a Lithuanian national council, the Taryba, declared independence in Vilnius in the House of Signatories, open to visitors today. In November Germany surrendered to the Western Allies, and the same day a Lithuanian republican government was set up.

With the re-emergence of an independent Poland eager to see Lithuania reunited with it or cede it the Vilnius area, which had a heavily Polish and/or Polonised population, things turned nasty. On 31 December 1918 the Lithuanian government fled to Kaunas, and days later the Red Army installed a communist government in Vilnius. Polish troops drove the Red Army out on 2 January 1919, only for the Red Army to recapture it three days later. The Poles hit back on 19 April, but were again thwarted. Following the Peace

Conference of Paris on 1 June 1919, Lithuanian independence was recognised, and on 15 May 1920 the first parliament met in Kaunas at the State Theatre Palace (today the Kaunas Musical Theatre). But on 9 October 1920 the Poles occupied Vilnius for a third time and on 10 October 1920 annexed the city once and for all.

Thus from 1920 until 1939, Vilnius and its surrounds was an isolated corner of Poland while the rest of Lithuania enjoyed independence, for the most part under the iron-fist rule (1926–40) of Lithuania's first president, Antanas Smetona (1874–1944). See the politician's statue and learn how he ruled along similar lines to Mussolini in Italy at Kaunas' Presidential Palace, now a museum. Kaunas was Lithuanian capital throughout this interwar period. In 1923 Lithuania annexed Memel (present-day Klaipėda).

### WWII & Soviet Rule

With the fatal signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop nonaggression pact, Lithuania fell to the Nazis and soon after (when it refused to join the Nazi attack on Poland in September 1939) into Soviet hands. The 'mutual-assistance pact' the USSR insisted on signing with Lithuania regained it Vilnius in October 1939 (the Red Army had taken the city in its invasion of eastern Poland at the same time as Germany had invaded western Poland). But this was little consolation for the terror Lithuania experienced as a USSR republic – a fate and history it shared with its immediate neighbours, Estonia and Latvia. Soviet purges saw thousands upon thousands of Balts killed or deported.

Following Hitler's invasion of the USSR and the Nazi occupation of the region in 1941, nearly all of Lithuania's Jewish population – between 135,000 and 300,000 people according to varying estimates – were killed; most Vilnius Jews were killed in its ghetto or in Paneriai Forest, a horribly unnerving place to visit today. An estimated 45,000 Lithuanians were enlisted in German military units; others were conscripted for forced labour; and 80,000 Lithuanians escaped to the West between 1944 and 1945 to avoid the Red Army's reconquest of the Baltic countries. In all some 475,000 Lithuanians perished during WWII.

Between 1944 and 1952 under Soviet rule, a further 250,000 Lithuanians were

killed or deported, suppression of spirit and free thought being the order of the day. Nowhere is this dark, dark period in Lithuanian history explained more powerfully than at the Museum of Genocide Victims in the old KGB headquarters in Vilnius.

### 1989–91

A yearning for independence had simmered during the glasnost years, but it was with the storming success of Lithuania's popular front, Sąjūdis, in the March 1989 elections for the USSR Congress of People's Deputies (Sąjūdis won 30 of the 42 Lithuanian seats) that Lithuania surged ahead in the Baltic push for independence. The pan-Baltic human chain formed to mark the 50th anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact a few months later confirmed public opinion, and in December that year the Lithuanian Communist Party left the Communist Party of the Soviet Union – a landmark in the break-up of the USSR.

Vast proindependence crowds met Gorbachev when he visited Vilnius in January 1990. Sąjūdis won a majority in the elections to Lithuania's supreme soviet in February, and on 11 March this assembly declared Lithuania an independent republic. In response, Moscow carried out weeks of troop manoeuvres around Vilnius and clamped an economic blockade on Lithuania, cutting off fuel supplies. The pressure was finally removed after 2½ months, when Sąjūdis leader Vytautas Landsbergis agreed to a 100-day moratorium on the independence declaration in exchange for independence talks between the respective Lithuanian and USSR governments. No foreign country had yet recognised Lithuanian independence.

Soviet hardliners gained the ascendancy in Moscow in winter 1990–91, and in January 1991 Soviet troops and paramilitary police occupied and stormed Vilnius' TV tower and TV centre, killing 14 people; tourists bungee jump from this tower today. Some of the barricades put up around the parliament remain. On 6 September 1991 the USSR recognised the independence of Lithuania.

### Towards Europe

Lithuanians have a sense of irony: they led the Baltic push for independence, then, at their first democratic parliamentary elections, in 1992, raised eyebrows by voting

in the ex-communist Lithuanian Democratic Labour Party (LDDP). Presidential elections followed in 1993, the year the last Soviet soldier left the country, with former Communist Party first secretary Algirdas Brazauskas landing 60% of the vote. Corruption scandals dogged his term in office – a painful time as inflation ran at 1000% and thousands of jobs were lost from inefficient heavy industry. The collapse of the country's banking system in 1995–96 did little to aid economic performance.

But change was underway: Lithuania's currency, the litas, replaced the talonas (coupon), the transitional currency used during the phasing out of the Soviet rouble in Lithuania; Lithuania opened a stock exchange, abolished the death penalty and joined the NATO Partnership for Peace programme; and Lithuania became the official language and an association agreement was signed with the EU. Presidential elections in 1998 ushered in wild card Valdas Adamkus, a 71-year-old Lithuanian emigré and US citizen, resident in the US since his parents fled the Soviets in 1944. Hopes that Adamkus would inject some Western life into the failing economy ran higher still when he appointed a member of the ruling Conservative Party, 43-year-old Rolandas Paksas, prime minister in 1999. The popular Vilnius mayor and champion stunt pilot won instant approval as 'the people's choice' – so much so in fact that he ran against Adamkus in 2003 presidential elections and won.

By 2001 the Lithuanian economy was being praised by the International Monetary Fund as one of the world's fastest growing, thanks to large-scale privatisation in 1997–98 and a rigorous campaign to lure international cash by focusing on the country's low operating costs, cheap workforce and its status as a transport hub between East and West. When deep recession struck following the 1998 Russian economic crisis (GDP shrank by 4.1%), forward-thinking Lithuanians clawed their way back by diversifying into new EU electronic, chemical and manufacturing markets. Lithuania joined the World Trade Organization in 2000, and in 2002 – in a bid to make exports competitive and show determination to join Europe – pegged its currency to the euro instead of the US dollar.

In 2001 Lithuania took over as annual chair of the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers at its 109th session in Strasbourg, and the Dalai Lama paid a visit. In 2003 it became the first Baltic country to resolve border disputes with Russia (over its shared land and maritime borders with Russian-owned Kaliningrad).

## THE CULTURE National Psyche

With their warm and welcoming emotional natures, tendency towards mysticism and fierce pride in their national identity, gut-driven Lithuanians really are the Italians of the Baltics. Their pride in being part of the EU and home to the geographical centre

### TOP FIVE HISTORICAL READS

- *The Last Girl* (Stephan Collishaw) Absolutely spellbinding, this superb historical novel set in Vilnius flits between WWII and the 1990s.
- *Lithuania Awakening* (Alfred Senn) From 'new winds' (the birth of the independence movement in the 1980s) to a 'new era' (independence), Senn's look at how the Lithuanians achieved independence remains the best in its field; read the entire thing free online at <http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft3x0nb2m8/>.
- *Lithuania – Independent Again: The Autobiography of Vytautas Landsbergis* The scene outside parliament on 13 January 1991 is among the dramatic moments Landsbergis brings vividly to life in his autobiography.
- *Forest of the Gods* (Balys Sruoga) The author's powerful account of his time spent in the Stutthof Nazi concentration camp in the early 1940s was censored, hence not published until 1957.
- *Showdown: The Lithuanian Rebellion and the Break Up of the Soviet Union* (Richard J Krickus) A look at the USSR and the huge part played in its break-up by Lithuania.

### DO'S & DON'TS

- When visiting a Lithuanian bring an odd number of flowers: even-numbered bouquets are for dead-solemn occasions – and the dead!
- Don't shake hands across the threshold; it brings bad luck.
- Always maintain eye contact when toasting your host or they'll think you're shifty.

of Europe is reflected in their willingness to speak English, German, Russian or any other language they can twist their nimble tongues around.

Lithuania oozes confidence, boldly exuding a happy-go-lucky assurance that manifests itself in the toppled Lenins it happily shows off in a Soviet sculpture park (p326) and the 'republic' (p298) that artists have created in the capital.

Tradition and a deep-rooted attachment to the land play an integral part in the national psyche – a trait Lithuania shares with its Baltic neighbours.

### Lifestyle

The contrast in lifestyle between Vilnius and elsewhere is stark.

Capital-city slickers are young, buoyant, cash-happy and party-mad. Many live in stylish loft apartments in Old Town, are professionals and car-owners, and end the day with friends in the latest trendy bar or café. Pumping iron in the gym, yoga and catching a movie are run-of-the-mill pursuits, while weekends mean shopping, kitesurfing and dancing till dawn in Palanga or snowboarding in Latvia. With supermarkets and many shops open sunrise to sunset, seven days a week, Sunday is no different to any other day; Mass has less allure for the upwardly mobile set in increasingly commercial, diverse and international Vilnius, where casinos and strip joints rapidly threaten to outnumber churches (quite an achievement in Vilnius where a church studs practically every Old Town street corner!).

Then there is the rest of Lithuania – a monochrome mix of provincial town and rural scape, where poverty is about the only prevalent excess. The government

might well have bumped up the minimum monthly salary by 10% to 500Lt (€145) in 2004, and the average monthly wage might well have reached a record 1270Lt (€368) in 2005, but for many living and working in the countryside, such figures are meaningless. These people work the land and that is about it, unemployment being way higher in rural areas than wealthier urban circles.

Until 1998 Vilnius was the only place in Lithuania to offer a university degree. Since then, nine state universities, five academies and four colleges have sprung up. More than 80% of pupils go on to further education; most students work full time alongside studying and live in university dorms or with friends rather than remaining in the parental nest. Family ties remain fiercely strong, however, many married couples living with elderly parents no longer able to live alone. Despite increased career prospects, especially for women, Lithuanians marry young – as a day trip from Vilnius to Trakai, full of blushing brides scarcely out of their teens, on a Saturday afternoon in summer instantly reveals! Many marriages – 57 of every 100 – end in divorce.

### Population

The population is predominantly urban: a quarter of the population lives in and around Vilnius and 40% of people live in the country's five major cities – Vilnius plus

### LIFESTYLE IN A NUTSHELL

- Lithuania's wealthiest 10% spend 7.7 times more a month than its poorest 10%.
- The country's richest spend 25% of their income on food, the poorest 62%.
- Fifty-one percent of urban households own a car compared to 37% in the countryside.
- Excluding kids' bikes, 64% of rural homes own a bicycle. In urban areas 31% of homes are pedal-powered.
- In rural areas just one home in 10 is computer-equipped, unlike in the five major cities – Vilnius, Kaunas, Klaipėda, Šiauliai and Panevėžys – where 38% of households have a PC.

Kaunas, Šiauliai and Panevėžys in central Lithuania and Klaipėda on the Baltic Sea. Population density was 46.6 people per sq km before WWII, peaked at 56.6 people per sq km prior to independence in 1990 (when contraception was illegal) and shrunk to 52.5 people per sq km in 2005.

Easily the most ethnically homogeneous population of the three Baltic countries, Lithuanians count for 83% of the total population, making multiculturalism less of a hot potato than in Latvia. Russians form 6.3% of the Lithuanian population, the bizarrely Soviet town of Visaginas (p322), created in the 1970s, being the country's Russian stronghold. Poles and Jews make up 6.7% and 0.1% respectively.

Lithuania's smallest ethnic community, numbering just 280, are the Karaites. An early 19th-century prayer house and ethnographic museum (p316) in Trakai provide insight into the culture and beliefs of this tiny Turkic minority.

Lithuanian Roma officially number 2500, but Vilnius' **Human Rights Monitoring Institute** (www.hrmi.lt) reckons the real figure is 3000, centred in Vilnius, Panevėžys and Šiauliai. Some 46% are aged under 20 and many, unlike the Roma elders they live with, don't speak Lithuanian. Since 1993 a government-initiated programme for the integration of Roma into Lithuanian society has paid lip service to improving education and living conditions for Roma: nothing has changed for this impoverished and discriminated-against minority. Getting the government to put antidiscrimination legislation in place is one of the goals of the Roma Rights Defense Legal Programme launched by the Human Rights Monitoring Institute in April 2005.

More than three million Lithuanians live abroad, including an estimated 800,000 in the USA. Other communities exist in Canada, South America, Britain and Australia.

## SPORT

Basketball is akin to religion. The worshipped national team are reigning European champions and scooped bronze in three successive Olympic Games (1992, 1996 and 2000), only to lose it to the American Dream Team in Athens at the 2004 Games – after both teams turned up in the same coloured strips!

Basketball players of legendary status include retired Sarūnas Marčiulionis, the

first Lithuanian to play in the NBA in 1989, and Arvydas Sabonis, one of basketball's greatest centres. Marčiulionis and Sabonis have since founded basketball schools – and luxury hotels – in Vilnius and Kaunas respectively.

Popular ice-skaters and a married couple to boot, **Margarita Drobiazko & Povilas Vanagas** (<http://drobiazko.vanagas.w3.lt>), rather controversially lost out on medals both at the Salt Lake City Winter Olympics (they were placed 5th) and the Ice Dancing World Championship (4th) in 2002, amid accusations of biased judges. But their woe has raised the profile of the sport in Lithuania. Of equal elegance and excellence off ice are Lithuanian dancesport duo Arūnas Bižokas and Edita Daniūtė, whose incredible manoeuvres landed them gold at the 2005 Dance-sport World Games in Germany and a world ranking of No 2.

World-champion cyclist Diana Žiliūtė won the Tour de France in 1999 and silver at the Sydney 2000 Olympics. Raimondas Rumšas surprised everyone by finishing 3rd in the 2002 Tour de France, only for his wife to be stopped with a campervan full of drugs driving home. Rumšas was banned from racing for a year after testing positive for performance-enhancing drugs during the 2003 Giro d'Italia and in November 2005 appeared in court on charges of smuggling illegal drugs into France during the 2002 Tour. The Bicycle Museum (p339) in Šiauliai is a fun spot to learn about lesser-known Lithuanian riders.

Discus thrower Alekna Virgilijus – guard to the Lithuanian president during his spare time (at 2.02m tall and 130kg it's best not to mess with him) – scooped Lithuania's only gold medals at the 2000 and 2004 Olympics.

## RELIGION

Lithuania was the last pagan country in Europe, not baptised into Roman Catholicism until 1387. This explains why so much of its religious art, national culture and traditions have raw pagan roots. During the Soviet years, Catholicism was persecuted and hence became a symbol of nationalistic fervour. Churches were seized, closed and turned into 'museums of atheism' or used for other secular purposes (such as a radio station in the case of Christ's Resurrection

Basilica in Kaunas, open for business as usual today) by the state.

Other minorities include Orthodox believers, Lutherans, Jews, Evangelical Christians and the pagan Romuva movement.

## ARTS

Lithuania is Baltic queen of contemporary jazz, theatre and the avant-garde, while its arts scene is one of Europe's youngest, freshest and most dynamic.

## Literature

The Renaissance ushered in the first book to be published in Lithuanian – a catechism by Martynas Mažvydas, whose statue stands in Klaipėda – in 1547 and the creation of Vilnius University in 1579. But it wasn't until a couple of centuries later that a true Lithuanian literature emerged.

The land was the focus of the earliest fiction: The Seasons (*Metai*), by Kristijonas Donelaitis, described serf life in the 18th century in poetic form, and a century on Antanas Baranauskas' poem, *Anykščiai Pine Forest* (*Anykščių šilėlis*; 1860–1), used the deep, dark forest around Anykščiai as a symbol of Lithuania, bemoaning its destruction by foreign landlords.

Russia's insistence on the Cyrillic alphabet for publishing from 1864 (until 1904) hindered literature's development – and inspired poet Jonas Mačiulis (1862–1932) to push for its national revival. A statue of the Kaunas priest, nicknamed Maironis, stands in Kaunas' Old Town. The city's Maironis

### GODLY AFFAIRS

*Of Gods and Holidays: The Baltic Heritage* (1999) is a revealing look at Lithuania's pagan roots.

Lithuania Literary Museum (p333), in Maironis' former home, tells his life story. Maironis' romantic *Voices of Spring* (*Pavasario balsai*; 1895) is deemed the start of modern Lithuanian poetry.

Several major Polish writers grew up in Lithuania and regarded themselves as partly Lithuanian, notably Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855), the inspiration of 19th-century nationalists, whose great poem *Pan Tadeusz* begins 'Lithuania, my fatherland...' The rooms in Vilnius' Old Town, where he stayed while studying at Vilnius University, form a museum (p297). Winner of the 1980 Nobel prize, Czesław Miłosz (1911–2004) translated Lithuanian folk songs into French and wrote about intellectuals and the Soviet occupation in *The Captive Mind*.

Novelists at the fore of contemporary Lithuanian literature include Antanas Skėma, whose semiautobiographical novel *White Linen Shroud* (*Balta drobule*; 1954) recounts a childhood in Kaunas, then emigration to Germany and New York. It pioneered stream of consciousness in Lithuanian literature. Realist novelist and short-story writer Ričardas Gavelis shocked the literary world with *Poker in Vilnius* (1989) and *Vilnius Jazz* (1993), which openly criticised the defunct

### TOP FIVE CONTEMPORARY READS

Online, visit **Books from Lithuania** ([www.booksfromlithuania.lt](http://www.booksfromlithuania.lt)), a comprehensive literary information centre reviewing the latest in Lithuanian poetry and prose, including English-language translations.

- *The Earth Remains* (edited by Laima Sruoginis) Anthology of contemporary Lithuanian prose with lengthy excerpts from key works, including Gavelis' *Poker in Vilnius*.
- *Lithuanian Literature* (edited by Vytautas Kubilius) Read this to get the big picture.
- *Gone with Dreams* (Jurga Ivanauskaitė) A young Lithuanian woman travels to the Himalayas and hangs out with Tibetan monks in her quest for spiritual enlightenment.
- *Bohin Manor* (Tadeusz Konwicki) Set in the aftermath of the 1863 uprising, this novel by a leading modern Polish writer born in Lithuania uses the past to comment on current events and evokes tensions between locals, their Russian rulers and a Jewish outsider, as well as the foreboding and mysterious nature of the Lithuanian backwoods.
- *Raw Amber* (edited by Laima Sruoginis) Anthology of contemporary Lithuanian poetry.

Soviet system and mentality. Equally controversial was the story of a priest's love affair with a woman, *The Witch and the Rain (Ragana ir lietus)* by Jurga Ivanauskaitė, banned on publication in 1992. Her subsequent novel *Gone with Dreams* (2000) highlighted new issues and subjects, such as religion, travel and perceptions of others' religion and cultures, that couldn't be addressed in Lithuanian literature until after 1991.

## Cinema & TV

Vilnius' Theatre, Music & Cinema Museum (p298) is the perfect place to find out about cinema and TV.

The 11 documentaries and one short film made by Audrius Stonys are acclaimed Europe-wide: *510 Seconds of Silence* (2000) – an angel's flight over Vilnius' Old Town, the lake-studded Aukštaitija National Park and Neringa – is awesome; watch it at [www.stonys.lt](http://www.stonys.lt).

Stonys codirected *Baltic Way* (1990) – which landed best European documentary in 1992 – with hot-shot director-producer Arūnas Matelis (b 1961). A frequent guest at Cannes, Matelis raised eyebrows by becoming the Minister of Changes and Migration in the Republic of Užupis (p298). Find him and his film crew at [www.nominum.lt](http://www.nominum.lt).

The grim reality of the post-Soviet experience is the focus for talented film director Šarūnas Bartas, whose silent B&W movie *Koridorius* (The Corridor; 1995) – set in a dilapidated apartment block in a Vilnius suburb – received international recognition. Bartas opened Lithuania's first independent film studio in 1987. Algimantas Puipa became prominent with *Vilko dantu karoliai* (The Necklace of Wolf's Teeth; 1998) and *Elze is Gilijos* (Elsie from Gilija; 1999).

With the onslaught of commercial box-office hits from abroad, the Lithuanian film industry relies heavily on its reputation as a cheap film location. Founded in Soviet Kaunas in 1940 and transferred to Vilnius in 1956, the **Lithuanian Film Studio** ([www.kftv.com](http://www.kftv.com)) has helped make dozens of big-name foreign movies since the mid-1990s: British TV serials *The New Adventures of Robin Hood* (1995–96) and *Elizabeth I* (filmed 2005) starring Jeremy Irons; feature films *The Devil's Arithmetic* (1998) and *Silence Becomes You* (2004) with one-time Batgirl Alicia Silverstone; and Brett Leonard's

*Highlander: The Source*, filmed in late 2005 in Vilnius, Kaunas and Trakai.

## Music

Lithuania is the Baltic jazz giant. Two noteworthy musicians are sparking pianist Gintautas Abarius and cerebral saxophonist Petras Vysniauskas. As famed is the Ganelin Trio, whose avant-garde jazz stunned the West when discovered in the 1980s. Kurpiai (p352) in Klaipėda and Birštonas Jazz (p339) are the spots to catch Lithuanian jazz.

Romantic folk-influenced Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis is Lithuania's leading composer from earlier periods. Two of his major works are the symphonic poems *Miske* (In the Forest) and *Jūra* (The Sea; 1900–07). Čiurlionis wrote many piano pieces, played and recorded notably by contemporary Lithuanian parliament chairman Vytautas Landbergis.

Rytis Mažulis (b 1961) represents a new generation of composers with his neo-avant-garde stance expressed in minimalist compositions for voice. Prominent late-20th-century musicians include Lithuanian Symphony Orchestra conductor Gintaras Rinkevičius; his counterpart at the Lithuanian Chamber Orchestra, Saulius Sondeckis; opera tenor Virgilijus Noreika; and booming baritone Vytautas Juozapaitis. Country-and-western icon Virgis Stakenas is the larger-than-life force behind the country's cult country music festival.

Home-brand pop music is dominated by girl band Mango, boy band B'avarija and Amberlife, whose debut album *My Way* (2003) saw critics dub the young male soloist 'the next Coldplay'. Skamp plays mainstream hip-hop and G&G Sindikatas mixes purer street sounds. Lemon's Joy plays popular electronic pop-rock, Rebel Heart plays hard rock and Lithuania's leading soloists are female blues singer Arina and Andrius Mamontovas, whose signature song is *Laužo šviesa* (Fire Light).

DJs Mamanija and Element are proof that dance music has arrived in Lithuania. Gravity (p312), Cozy (p311) and Pascha (p312) in Vilnius are the places to catch the latest on the Lithuanian DJ scene. On air, tune into **Užupio Radijas** ([www.uzupioradijas.lt](http://www.uzupioradijas.lt); 94.9 FM).

The most innovative sound to come out of Lithuania for years is **Inculto** ([www.inculto.net](http://www.inculto.net)), an eclectic band whose creative

## FOLK ART

The carved wooden crosses placed at crossroads, cemeteries, village squares and at the sites of extraordinary events across Lithuania are a beautiful expression of religious fervour – and a striking nationalistic statement. Pagan symbols of suns, moons and plants are intertwined, making the totems a unique cultural contradiction. Vincas Svirskis (1835–1916) was the master; see his carvings in Vilnius' Museum of Applied Arts (p294). In the Soviet period, such work was banned, although it has survived to amazing effect at the Hill of Crosses (p341) near Šiauliai. **Old Lithuanian Sculpture, Crosses and Shrines** ([www.tradicija.lt](http://www.tradicija.lt)) is an excellent online resource.

Several folk artists' workshops in Vilnius can be visited (p305), while galleries and museums such as Vilnius' Contemporary Art Centre (p297), Aukso Avis (p313) and Museum of Applied Arts and Kaunas' Čiurlionis Art Museum (p335) showcase contemporary creations. Ona Grigaitė and Dalia Laučkaitė-Jakimavičienė are big names in the ceramics world.

output reflects diverse world influences. This positive side of cultural globalisation was the message of Inculto's outstandingly successful no-name debut album (2005), a mix of traditional punk, rock, jazz and folk fused with Latin American rhythms and electronic beats. The album was meant to be called *PostSovPop* until the band's record label and sponsors persuaded it otherwise (the title was ditched from the cover but appeared on the inside jacket).

## Visual Arts

Lithuania's finest painter and musician is Varėna-born Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis (1875–1911), who spent his childhood in Druskininkai, where his home is now a museum (p325). He wrote Lithuania's first symphony, *In the Forest*, created piano pieces and conducted and composed string-quartet pieces. Oh yes, and he also put paint to canvas and produced romantic masterpieces in gentle, lyrical tones, theatre backdrops and some exquisite stained glass. The best collection of these works is in the National Čiurlionis Art Museum (p335) in Kaunas. Depression dogged Čiurlionis, although when he died aged 35 it was of pneumonia.

Lithuania has a thriving contemporary art scene. Vilnius artists created the tongue-in-cheek Republic of Užupis (p298), which hosts alternative art festivals, fashion shows and exhibitions in its breakaway state. Some 19km north, Lithuanian sculptor Gintaras Karosas heads up a sculpture park, *Europos parkas* (p318).

From Lenin to rock legend, Konstantinas Bogdanas was famed for his bronzes of communist heroes (see some in Druski-

ninkai's Soviet Sculpture Park; p326) and his bust of musician and composer Frank Zappa (p299).

Lithuanian photography has achieved international recognition. Vytautas Stanionis (b 1949) was the leading postwar figure, while artist Antanas Sutkus stunned the photographic world with his legendary shots of French philosopher Sartre and novelist Simone de Beauvoir cavorting in the sand on the Curonian Spit. Vitalijus Butyrinas' (b 1947) famous series *Tales of the Sea* uses abstract expressionism to make powerful images. For more on these and other hot shots, visit the **Union of Lithuanian Art Photographers** ([www.photography.lt](http://www.photography.lt)).

## Theatre

Lithuanian theatre is becoming an international force, with several young experimental directors turning European heads left, right and centre. Theatres yield 15% of their income from box-office sales; 13 of Lithuania's 25-odd theatres are state funded.

Vilnius-based Oskaras Koršunovas (b 1969) has done Europe's theatre-festival circuit with *Old Woman*, *Shopping and Fucking*, *PS Files OK* and his 2003 adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*. In 1999 the controversial director established his own theatre company in Vilnius, the Oskaras Koršunovas Theatre (OKT; p312), albeit one with no fixed stage. OKT won one of the country's most prestigious art awards for the best presentation of Lithuanian culture abroad in 2004 and was subsequently honoured with the additional title of Vilnius City Theatre.

Other big names include Gintaras Varnas, artistic director at the Kaunas Academic Drama Theatre (p337), voted Lithuania's

### THE LITHUANIAN AMBER ROAD

The capital has some striking amber galleries (p312) and a couple of tip-top fashion designers (p313) who work with 'Baltic gold'. But it is on the coast that the Lithuanian amber road – part of a compelling 418km pan-Baltic trail (p21 & p35) – gets serious.

The world's sixth-largest collection of Baltic amber comprising 14,478 pieces is the star of the show; find it in Palanga (p357) alongside an innovative amber-processing gallery inspired by master amber crafters' workshops of old. Elsewhere, there are beaches to hunt amber (p21), and amber jewellery galleries (p367) in Nida.

best director of the year several times, including in 2005; and Rimas Tuminas, who directed a fantastic play called *Madagaskaras* (set in independent 1920s Lithuania) by budding Lithuanian playwright Marius Ivaškevičius in Vilnius.

The international theatre festival, Sirens, an annual event in late September, was created in 2004 to mark the Lithuanian capital on the European cultural map. A key online information source on Lithuanian theatre is [www.theatre.lt](http://www.theatre.lt).

## ENVIRONMENT

### The Land

The largest of the Baltic countries, Lithuania is dotted with lush forests, 4000 lakes (covering 1.5% of the country) and a 100km-wide lowland centre. Latvia neighbours it to the north, Belarus to the southeast, and Poland

and the Kaliningrad Region (Russia) to the southwest. Juozapinėš (294m), straddling the Belarusian border, is the country's highest point.

Half of Lithuania's short (99km) Baltic Coast lies along the Curonian Spit – the region's most breathtaking natural feature. Split between Lithuania and Kaliningrad, the golden sand spit stretches for 98km and is just 4km wide, with sand dunes majestically rising up to 60m high. Behind it spans the Curonian Lagoon, into which the Nemunas River – Lithuania's longest river – flows.

### Wildlife

Lithuania is home to 70 species of mammal, including elks, wild boars and lynx, while the Nemunas Delta wetlands are an important breeding area for birds, including the stork (p282). The beaver, European bison and red deer have been reintroduced. Wolves breed in inland national parks; the Austrian grass snake slithers around in Dzūkija and large bat populations bat about everywhere. Occasionally, in a quiet spot in one of Lithuania's lovely lake lands, a rare freshwater turtle lays its eggs on an empty sandy shore.

Forest covers 30% of the country, pine, spruce and birch predominating. Predictably, trees are a source of great pride for Lithuanians, who honour their oldest with names like Kapinių pušis (Cemetery Pine) and Ragaonos uosis (Witch's Ash). In pagan times trees were said to shelter souls of the dead, soldiers killed in battle turning into trees. A century ago man hollowed out beehives high up (so brown bears didn't steal the honey) in pine tree trunks; dozens still stud the Dzūkija National Park.

### STORKS

Spring is marked by the arrival of the majestic stork, which jets in for the summer from Africa. The height of sensibility, this bird of passage usually settles back into the same nest it has used for years. Large and flat, the nest is balanced in a tree or atop a disused chimney or telegraph pole. Some are splayed out across wooden cartwheels, fixed atop tall poles by kindly farmers keen to have their farmstead blessed by the good fortune the stork brings. Lithuanians celebrate this traditional protector of the home with Stork Day (25 March), the day farmers traditionally stir their seeds, yet to be planted, to ensure a bigger and better crop.

Measuring 90cm in height, this beautiful long-legged, wide-winged creature is breathtaking in flight. Equally marvellous is the catwalk stance it adopts when strutting through meadows in search of frogs to feast on. It sleeps standing on one leg.

Lithuania, with approximately 13,000 pairs, enjoys Europe's highest density of storks. By contrast, the rare black stork numbers just seven pairs.

Dzūkija and Žemaitija are particularly rich in fauna, each protecting over 1000 species. Rare flowers found in the Aukštaitija National Park include the white water lily, ghost orchid, single-leaved bog orchid and hairy milk vetch. Sea holly is increasingly rare on the dunes of the Cu-

ronian Spit thanks to walkers who pick it to take home.

### National Parks & Reserves

Five national parks (one of which so spectacular and precious that Unesco declared it a World Heritage site in 2000), five nature

#### NATIONAL PARKS & RESERVES

National Park/ Reserve	Area	Features	Activities	Best time to visit
Aukštaitija National Park (p320)	300 sq km	69% forest, 15.5% river/lake; wolves & bears	walking, canoeing, kayaking, mushrooming & berrying, skiing	spring & summer
Čepkeliai Strict Nature Reserve (p328)	85 sq km	Lithuania's largest raised bog (54% of reserve) marsh, forest, cranes & woodgrouse	bird-watching (Jul-Mar); walking forbidden during nesting season (Apr-Jun)	summer & autumn
Curonian Spit National Park (p362)	265 sq km	high dunes, pine forests, beaches, lagoon & sea coast; rare species of mammals, birds & butterflies	cycling, swimming, walking, bird-watching	summer
Dzūkija National Park (p328)	550 sq km	forest, historic settlements	handicrafts, walking, canoeing, cycling, bird-watching	spring, summer & autumn
Labanoras Regional Park (p323)	528 sq km	Lithuania's largest regional park; rare flora & fauna, ancient burial mounds	canoeing, berrying & mushrooming	spring & summer
Nemunas Crook Regional Park (p339)	252 sq km	steep forested river banks, ravines & tallest pine trees (42m) in Lithuania	bird-watching, cycling, self-pampering	spring & autumn
Nemunas Delta Regional Park (p370)	289 sq km	unique delta of waterways, dikes, polders & islands with varied birdlife	bird-watching, fishing, boating	spring & autumn
Trakai Historical National Park (p316)	80 sq km	old town, castle museum, Kairates culture, 32 lakes including Lake Galvė with its 21 islands	swimming, sailing, fishing, canoeing, getting married	summer
Žemaitija National Park (p360)	200 sq km	forest; Lake Plateliai, Žemaičių Kalvarija Catholic shrine centre, Polkštinė Soviet Missile base	boating, cycling, fishing	spring, summer & autumn
Žuvintas Nature Reserve (p329)	54 sq km	important bird & plant habitat with 255 bird species & rich wetland wildlife	bird-watching & boating	spring & autumn

reserves and 394 areas under varying degrees of control protect 11.5% of Lithuanian land and plenty of rare and wonderful wildlife. Plenty more information on these parks and their wildlife habitats can be found in the regional chapters.

### Environmental Issues

A huge amount of EU money is being sunk into the environment: €307.05 million was allocated in cohesion funds and €32.8 million in structural funds alone to Lithuania between 2004 and 2006.

For years the hot potato has been Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant (p322), 120km north of Vilnius. One of two reactors similar in design to the Chernobyl plant in Ukraine was closed in December 2004, and with the final shutdown of the plant scheduled for 2009, the big question now is how to decommission the grim Soviet monstrosity with the least cost to the environment. The financial cost will be at least €3.2 billion – paid, for the most part, by Brussels. Those who don't make it to eastern Lithuania to witness the plant first-hand can view a scale model in Vilnius' Lithuanian Energy Museum (p302).

How future energy will be generated remains a big question. Just 3.7% of electricity is produced by renewable energy (including hydroelectric and wind power) at the moment, but EU directives demand that Lithuania ups this percentage to 12% by 2010.

Oil extraction at the D-6 oil field in the Kaliningrad Region, 22km from the coast and 500m downstream from the Lithuania–Russia border, threatens the Curonian Spit and Baltic Sea (see p34). Public protests in the late 1980s prevented the USSR cashing in on the estimated 24 million tonnes of oil. But in June 2004 Russian oil giant Lukoil started drilling. Large-scale demonstrations prompted the Council of Europe to intervene in 2005: it recognised good operating practises at the rig but empha-

sised the huge risks its proximity to the spit posed and called for Lithuania and Russia to cooperate more fully in protecting its shared coastline.

The transportation of oil, an environmental threat affecting all three Baltic countries (see p34), is as controversial as its exploitation.

### FOOD & DRINK

Long, miserable winters are to blame for Lithuania's hearty, waist-widening diet based on potatoes, meat and dairy products. Cuisine between regions does not vary enormously, although certain traits become noticeable as you eat your way around: mushrooms, berries and game dishes dominate in heavily forested eastern and southern Lithuania; beer sneaks its way into northern cooking pots; while fish reigns on the coast and in lake districts like Trakai. Bread everywhere tends to black and rye.

For a lowdown on Baltic food and drink, see p35.

### Staples & Specialities

Lithuanian food is epitomised in the formidable *cepelinai* (parcels of thick potato dough stuffed with cheese, *mesa* [meat] or *grybai* [mushrooms]); sometimes also known as a zeppelin). They come topped with a rich sauce made from onions, butter, sour cream and bacon bits. Another artery-furring favourite is sour cream-topped *kugelis* – a 'cannon ball' dish borrowed from German cuisine that bakes grated potatoes and carrots in the oven. *Koldūnai* are hearty ravioli stuffed with meat or mushrooms and *virtiniai* are stodge dumplings.

Lithuanians like the less savoury bits of animals: *liežuvis* (cow's tongue) and *alionių skilandis* (minced meat smoked in pork bladders) are delicacies, and Lithuanians pork out on *vėdarai* (fried pork innards). Hodgepodge or *šūpinys* – often mistakenly assumed to be hedgehog – is pork snout stewed with pork tail, trotter, peas and beans (try it in Vilnius at Žemaičių Smuklė, p309). Smoked pigs' ears, trotters and tails are popular beer snacks alongside *kepta duona* – sticks of black rye bread heaped with garlic and deep-fried. Order them with or without a gooey cheese topping.

Wild boar, rabbit and venison are popular in the Aukštaitija National Park, where

### TASTY READING

Anyone wanting to build their own *cepelinai* (zeppelin), bake a rabbit or butter-braise a hen should invest in the excellent cookery book *Lithuanian Traditional Foods*, compiled by Birutė Imbrasienė.

hunted birds and animals were traditionally fried in a clay coating or on a spit over an open fire in the 18th century. When perpetually drifting sands on the Curonian Spit in the 17th to 19th centuries made growing crops impossible, locals took to hunting and eating migrating crows in winter: one bite (followed by a generous slug of vodka) at the crow's neck killed the bird, after which its meat was eaten fresh, smoked or salted.

*Blynėliai* (pancakes) – a real favourite – are sweet or savoury and eaten any time of the day. *Varskōčiai* are stuffed with sweet curd, and *bulviniai blynėliai* are made with grated potato and stuffed with meat, *varske* (cheese curd) or fruit and chocolate.

Common starters include *silkė* (hering), *sprotai* (sprats), salads and soups. *Lietuviškos salotos* (Lithuanian salad) is a mayonnaise-coated mix of diced gherkins, boiled carrots, meat and anything else that happens to be in the fridge. *Šaltibarsčiai* – infamous for its fabulous shocking-pink colour – is a cold beetroot summer soup served with dill-sprinkled boiled potatoes and sour cream. Nettle, sorrel, cabbage and bread soup (not to mention blood soup, which does indeed have goose, duck or chicken blood in it) are other soups that have fed Lithuanians for centuries. Eel soup is specific to the Curonian Spit, where eel also comes as a main course. In Aukštaitija, fish soup served in a loaf of brown bread is the dish to try.

Mushrooms are popular, especially in August and September when forests are studded with dozens of different varieties – some edible, some deadly. Mushrooms are particularly abundant in Aukštaitija; see p328 for advice on picking mushrooms. In spring and early summer the same forests buzz with berry pickers; locals stand at roadsides in the region selling glass jam jars of wild strawberries, blueberries, blackberries and so on.

### Drinks

*Alus* (beer) is the most widespread drink, local brands being Švyturys (p353), Utenos (p323) and Kalnapilis (p345). Brewing traditions are oldest in the northern part of Lithuania, where small family-run breweries treat lucky palates to natural beer free of preservatives.

*Midus* (mead) – Lithuania's oldest and most noble drink, traditionally served in families to celebrate a baby's birth – was popular in the Middle Ages. Honey is boiled with water, berries and spices, then fermented with hops to produce an alcoholic drink of 10% to 15% proof. With the decline of beekeeping in the 18th century, Lithuanian mead disappeared and did not make a comeback until 1959, when Lietuvos midus in Stakliškės near Prienai in central Lithuania started making authentic mead; it produces seven varieties today.

*Gira* (kvass) is made from fermented grains or fruit and brown rye bread. Particularly popular as a street drink in the USSR, it is served as a 'Soviet flashback' at Druskininkai's Soviet sculpture park (p326).

The more sober-minded might enjoy the honey liqueur *stakliškes* or *starka*, made from apple-tree and pear-tree leaves. Herbal and fruit teas and brews made from linden, thyme, caraway, ginger, mint, rhubarb and a bounty of other sweet ingredients are age-old; Skonis ir Kvapas (p310) in Vilnius provides a unique opportunity to taste some.

### Celebrations

Christmas is the major culinary feast of the year. On 24 December families sit down to dinner in the evening around a candlelit hay-covered table topped with a white linen cloth; the hay anticipates Jesus' birth and serves as a place for the souls of dead family members to rest. (Indeed, one place around the table is always laid for someone who died that year.) The Christmas Eve feast that unfolds comprises 12 dishes – one for each month of the coming year to ensure year-long happiness and plenty. Dishes are fish- and vegetarian-based and include festive *kūčiukai* – small cubed poppy-seed biscuits served in a bowl of poppy-seed milk; others like herrings, pike, mushrooms and various soups are not necessarily seasonal.

### GREEN LINKS

- **Lithuanian Fund for Nature** (☎ 5-231 0700; www.glis.lt; Algirdo gatvė 22-3, Vilnius)
- **Lithuanian Green Movement** (☎ 37-324 241; www.zaliejai.lt; Kanto gatvė 6, Kaunas).



**EAT YOUR WORDS**

Don't know a pig's ear from its trotter? Here are a few useful phrases. For other words and phrases when ordering a meal see the Language chapter.

**Useful Phrases**

**A table for..., please.**

**May I see the menu, please?**

*stah-lah... prah-show*

*ahr gah-leh-chow gow-ti man-yew*

*prah-show*

*ahr yoos tu-ri-ta man-yew*

*ahn-glish-kai*

*ahsh naw-reh-chow*

*ish-bahn-dee-ti taw*

*ahsh na-vahl-gow*

*meh-sish-kaw*

*Stalg... prašau.*

*Ar galėčiau gauti meniu*

*prašau?*

*Ar jūs turite meniu*

*anglieskai?*

*Aš norėčiau*

*išbandyti to.*

*Aš nevalgau...*

*mėsiško*

**Do you have the menu in English?**

**I'd like to try that.**

**I don't eat...**

**meat**

**Food Glossary**

<i>arbata</i>	tea	<i>avietės</i>	raspberries
<i>braškės</i>	strawberries	<i>bifštekas</i>	beefsteak
<i>blynėliai</i>	pancakes	<i>burokėliai</i>	beetroot
<i>cepelinai</i>	boiled potato dumplings stuffed with meat and covered with bacon, cream and butter sauce	<i>duona</i>	black rye bread
		<i>ėriena</i>	lamb
<i>erškėtas</i>	sturgeon	<i>gervuogės</i>	blackberries
<i>jautiena</i>	beef	<i>grybai</i>	mushrooms
<i>karbonadas</i>	breaded pork chop	<i>kaldūnai</i>	Lithuanian dim sims
<i>kiauliena</i>	pork	<i>kava</i>	coffee
<i>kotletai</i>	rissoles	<i>kiaušiniai</i>	eggs
<i>kopūstų sriuba</i>	cabbage soup	<i>kopūstai</i>	cabbage
<i>mėlynės</i>	bilberries	<i>menkė</i>	cod
<i>pienas</i>	milk	<i>morkos</i>	carrots
<i>pupos</i>	beans	<i>plekšnė</i>	plaice
<i>silkė</i>	herring	<i>rūkytas unguris</i>	smoked eel
<i>šernas</i>	wild boar	<i>šaltibarščiai</i>	beetroot and sour-cream soup (cold)
<i>šilkmedžio uogos</i>	mulberries	<i>skilandis</i>	salami-style pork sausage
<i>sterkas</i>	perch	<i>sūris</i>	cheese
<i>sviestas</i>	butter	<i>unguris</i>	eel
<i>upėtakis</i>	trout	<i>varškė</i>	curd; like cottage cheese
<i>vėžiukas</i>	shrimp	<i>veršiena</i>	veal
<i>vištiena</i>	chicken	<i>žirnėliai</i>	peas
<i>žuvies asorti</i>	fish assortment		

*Šakotis* – 'egg cake' – is a large tree-shaped cake covered with long spikes (made from a rather dry, sponge-cake mixture of flour, margarine, sugar, sour cream and dozens and dozens of eggs), which is served at weddings and other special occasions.

**Where to Eat & Drink**

Dining Lithuanian-style can mean spending anything from €5 for a three-course meal in a self-service café in a provincial town well off the tourist trail to €100 in a swish

upmarket restaurant in the capital. Restaurants rarely pin a menu up outside, making it impossible to do a price and dish check before committing yourself. In Vilnius, choice of cuisine and price range covers the whole gamut, and an English-language menu is usually available; elsewhere the choice is limited and menus are rarely translated. Service is at its best in the capital – and generally appalling everywhere else.

For more information on types of eateries and opening hours, see p37.

**Habits & Customs**

A traditional dose of hospitality means loosening your belt several notches and skipping breakfast. Feasting is lengthy and plentiful, punctuated by many choruses of *Išgeriam!* (Let's drink!) and *Iki dugno!* (Bottoms up!). Starter dishes can be deceptively generous, leading unsuspecting guests to think they're the main meal. To decline further helpings may offend and be taken to mean that you don't like the food or the hospitality.

The family meal is a ceremonious affair and one that is taken very seriously, albeit one increasingly reserved for feast days, birthdays and other occasions in urban Lithuania's quicker-paced society. Each member of the family has a set place at the table – father at the head, mother opposite. If you arrive at someone's home while the family is seated, be sure to say *skanaus* (enjoy your meal); *prašom* (you're welcome) in response is an invitation to sit down and share the meal, while *aciū* basically means 'thanks but go away!'

**VILNIUS**

📍 5 / pop 542,250

Bizarre, beautiful and bewitching, Lithuania's capital seduces visitors with its astonishing Old Town charm. Its chocolate-box baroque skyline littered with the spires of Orthodox and Catholic churches are intoxicating, decadent and fragile – so much so that Unesco has declared this, Europe's largest baroque old town, a World Heritage site. But there's more to this devilishly attractive capital than meets the eye. There is an underlying oddness that creates its soul.

Where else could there be the world's only statue of psychedelic musician and composer Frank Zappa? Or a self-proclaimed, unofficial, independent republic inhabited by artists and dreaming bohemians? Where else is there the spirit of freedom and resistance that existed during Soviet occupation? There are reminders of loss and pain everywhere, from the horror of the KGB's torture cells to the ghetto in the centre of all this beauty where the Jewish community lived before their mass wartime slaughter.

Strange bars glow inside dark courtyards and medieval archways frame the life of the narrow, cobbled streets through which

change has swept with panache. Using foreign cash and local vision, this stylish little city has big plans. But new business and infrastructure – even a skyscraper skyline – won't disguise the curious charm of eccentric, soulful Vilnius.

**HISTORY**

Legend says Vilnius was founded in the 1320s when Lithuanian grand duke Gediminas dreamt of an iron wolf that howled with the voices of 100 wolves – a sure sign to build a city as mighty as their cry. In fact, the site had already been settled for 1000 years.

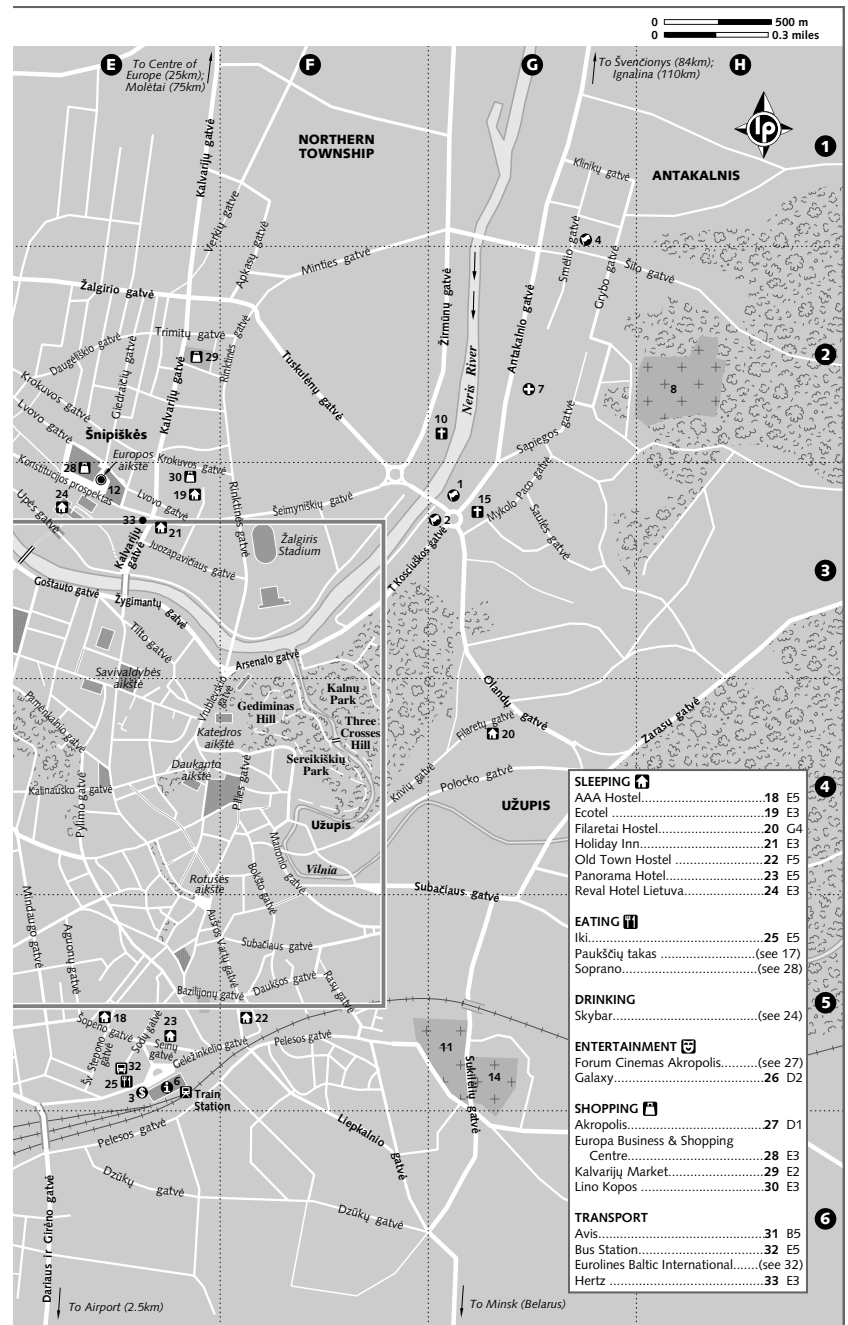
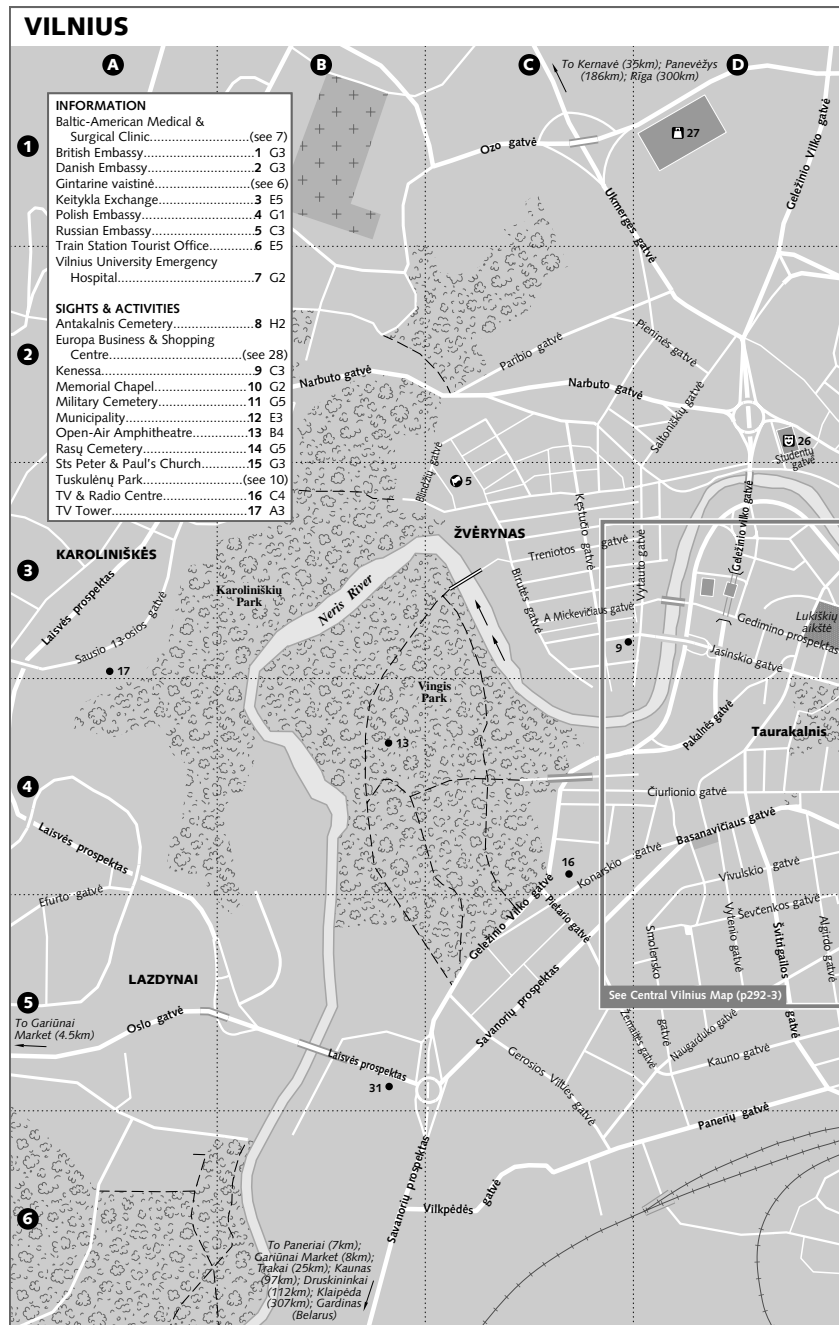
Moat, wall and tower atop Gediminas Hill protected 14th- and 15th-century Vilnius from Teutonic attacks (p273). Tatar attacks prompted inhabitants to build a 2.4km defensive wall (1503–22), and by the end of the 16th century Vilnius was among Eastern Europe's biggest cities. Three centuries on, industrialisation arrived: railways were laid and Vilnius became a key Jewish city.

Occupied by Germany during WWI, it became an isolated pocket of Poland afterwards. WWII ushered in another German occupation and the death knoll for its Jewish population (p300). Postwar Vilnius ushered in new residential suburbs populated by Lithuanians from elsewhere alongside immigrant Russians and Belarusians. In the late 1980s the capital was the focus of Lithuania's push for independence from the USSR.

Vilnius has fast become a European city. In 1994 its old town became a Unesco World Heritage site and four years later the **Old Town Renewal Agency** ([www.vsa.lt](http://www.vsa.lt)) was established to spearhead its dramatic revitalisation. Since his election at the tender age of 32 in November 2000, dynamic city mayor Artūras Zuokas, from the Liberal Union Party, has worked wonders in raising the city's profile internationally and transforming it into the tourist hot spot it is today.

**ORIENTATION**

The centre sits on the south bank of the Neris River. Its heart is cathedral-studded Katedros aikštė with Gediminas Hill rising behind it. Southward lies the cobbled Old Town, which has *Pilies gatvė* as the main pedestrian thoroughfare. East along the river is the self-proclaimed Užupis Republic.



## VILNIUS IN...

## Two Days

Spend the first day exploring Old Town, not missing the **cathedral** (p296), **Pilies gatvė** (p296), the **Gates of Dawn** (p297), the **university's 13 courtyards** (p296) and lunch on an Old Town terrace. At dusk hike up **Gediminas Hill** (p294) for a city-spire sunset. Second day, visit the **Museum of Genocide Victims**, (p302) stroll around Užupis and scale several floors for an apéritif and Vilnius panorama (p295).

## Four Days

Enjoy a couple of days exploring essential Vilnius and on the third day, visit **Trakai** (p315) or **Druskininkai** (p324). Last day, do some Vilnius museums and a spot of linen, **amber** (p312) and Lithuanian **design** (p313) shopping.

## One Week

Add on an **arts and crafts day** (p305). Depending on your interests, spend another day discovering **Jewish Vilnius** (p300), marvelling at religious jewels in the **Museum of Applied Art** (p294) or take your pick of churches.

Vilnius' main train and bus stations are about 1.5km from Katedros aikštė. Heading out towards the west, Gedimino prospektas cuts straight across the newer part of the town centre to parliament. Immediately north of the Neris River rise the business district of Šnipiškės (p302) and Vilnius Beach (p305).

## Maps

Bookshops, tourist offices, some hotels and supermarkets sell maps published by Briedis (p388) and Jāņa sēta. Briedis' *Vilniaus Centras* (Central Vilnius; 1:7000; 5.60Lt) features a street index and a 1:100,000 map of greater Vilnius.

## INFORMATION

## Bookshops

**Akademinių Knyga** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 261 9711; Universiteto gatvė 4) Translated Lithuanian prose and fiction, LP travel guides.

**Humanitas** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 262 1153; www.humanitas.lt; Vokiečių gatvė 2) LP guides and a staggering selection of art and design books.

**Littera** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 268 7258; Šv Jono gatvė 12) University bookshop.

**Vaga** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 249 8392; Gedimino prospektas 50) Great map selection.

## Emergency

For emergency telephone numbers, see the Quick Reference section on the inside cover of this book.

## Internet Access

Vilnius airport and the length of Vokiečių gatvė is a free wi-fi zone; find an updated list of other hot spots at www.wifi.lt.

**Collegium** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 261 8334; www.dora.lt; Pilies gatvė 22-1; per hr 8Lt; ☎ 8am-midnight)

**Interneto Kavinė** (Map pp292-3; Pylimo gatvė 21; per hr 3Lt; ☎ 9am-midnight)

**Interneto Kavinė** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 231 2622; Klaipėdos gatvė 3; per hr 4Lt; ☎ 24hr)

**Omnitel** (Map pp292-3; Gedimino prospektas 12; per hr 3Lt; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat)

**r2e** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 268 5833; Goštauto gatvė 4; per hr 2.50Lt; ☎ 24hr)

## Internet Resources

**www.tourism.vilnius.lt** Tourist office website; brilliant up-to-the-minute capital guide.

**www.vilnius.lt** Informative city municipality website.

## Laundry

Most Vilnius hostels (p306) have a washing machine for guests, and upmarket hotels run a laundry service.

**Palūstrė** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 216 0000; Savanorių prospektas 11a; ☎ 7am-7pm Mon-Fri, to 2pm Sat) Service washes and self-service machines.

## Left Luggage

**Bus Station** (Map pp288-9; Bagažinė; Sodų gatvė 22; bag less/more than 180cm per 24hr 3/7Lt; ☎ 5.30am-9pm Mon-Sat, 7am-9pm Sun)

**Train Station** (Map pp288-9; Geležinkelio gatvė; central hall basement; per day 3Lt)

## Libraries

**American Centre** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 266 0330; webemailvilnius@state.gov; Pranciskonų gatvė 3/6; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Thu, to 5pm Fri) American media in a 14th-century monastery.

**British Council** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 264 4890; www.britishcouncil.lt; Jogailos gatvė 4; ☎ 11am-6pm Tue-Sat) Inside the Business Centre 2000; British papers, mags and free Internet access for members (25Lt a year).

**Centre Culturel Français** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 231 2985; www.centrefrancais.lt; Didžioji gatvė 1; ☎ 1.30-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 10am-3pm Sat)

## Media

**Exploring Vilnius** (www.exploringcity.com) Detailed guide, free in hotels and bookshops.

**Vilnius In Your Pocket** (www.inyourpocket.com)

Quality city guide published every two months, available as PDF download or in bookshops, tourist offices and newspaper kiosks (5Lt).

## Medical Services

**Baltic-American Medical & Surgical Clinic** (Map pp288-9; ☎ 234 2020; www.bak.lt; Nemenčinės gatvė 54a; ☎ 24hr)

**Euro vaistinė** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 270 4704; Gedimino prospektas 8; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9am-8pm Sat, 10am-5pm Sun)

**Gedimino vaistinė** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 261 0135; Gedimino prospektas 27; ☎ 24hr) Pharmacy.

**Gintarine vaistinė** (Map pp288-9; Geležinkelio gatvė 16; ☎ 7am-9pm Mon-Fri, 9am-6pm Sat & Sun) At the central hall of the train station.

**Vilnius University Emergency Hospital** (Map pp288-9; ☎ 216 9140; Šiltnamių gatvė 29; ☎ 24hr)

## Money

The following all have ATMs accepting Visa and MasterCard.

**American Express** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 212 5809, 24hr service ☎ 8-616 81255; www.amextravel.lt; Vokiečių gatvė 13) Lithuania's only American Express agent issues emergency cheques and replaces lost AmEx traveller's cheques.

**Keitykla Exchange** (Map pp288-9; Parex Bankas; ☎ 213 5454; www.keitykla.lt; Geležinkelio gatvė 6; ☎ 24hr) Currency exchange with ATM; exit the train station and head left.

**Hansa Bankas** (www.hansabank.lt) Gedimino (Map pp292-3; Gedimino prospektas 56); Vilniaus (Map pp292-3; Vilniaus gatvė 16) Cashes Thomas Cook and AmEx traveller's cheques.

**Vilniaus Bankas** Gedimino (Map pp292-3; Gedimino prospektas 12); Jogailos (Map pp292-3; Jogailos gatvė 9a); Vokiečių (Map pp292-3; Vokiečių gatvė 9)

## Post

**Branch Post Office** (Map pp292-3; Vokiečių gatvė 7)  
**Central Post Office** (Map pp292-3; Gedimino prospektas 7)

## Tourist Information

All three tourist offices sell maps and make accommodation bookings (6Lt).

**Old Town tourist office** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 262 9660; tic@vilnius.lt; Vilniaus gatvė 22; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat & Sun Jun-Sep) Seasonal office with info on the city and surrounds; rents bicycles (p314).

**Train station tourist office** (Map pp288-9; ☎ 269 2091; Geležinkelio gatvė 16; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat) In the central hall of the train station.

**Town hall tourist office** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 262 6470; turizm.info@vilnius.lt; Didžioji gatvė 31; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat & Sun) Hidden in the former town hall, it organises city tours (p305) and English-speaking guides (140Lt/two hours).

## Travel Agencies

**Baltic Travel Service** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 212 0220; www.bts.lt; Subačiaus gatvė 2) Reservations for country farmstays (p382).

**Lithuanian Student & Youth Travel** (Jaunimo kelionių centras; Map pp292-3; ☎ 239 7397; www.jaunimas.lt; Basanavičiaus gatvė 30) Cheap fares for International Student Identity Card holders.

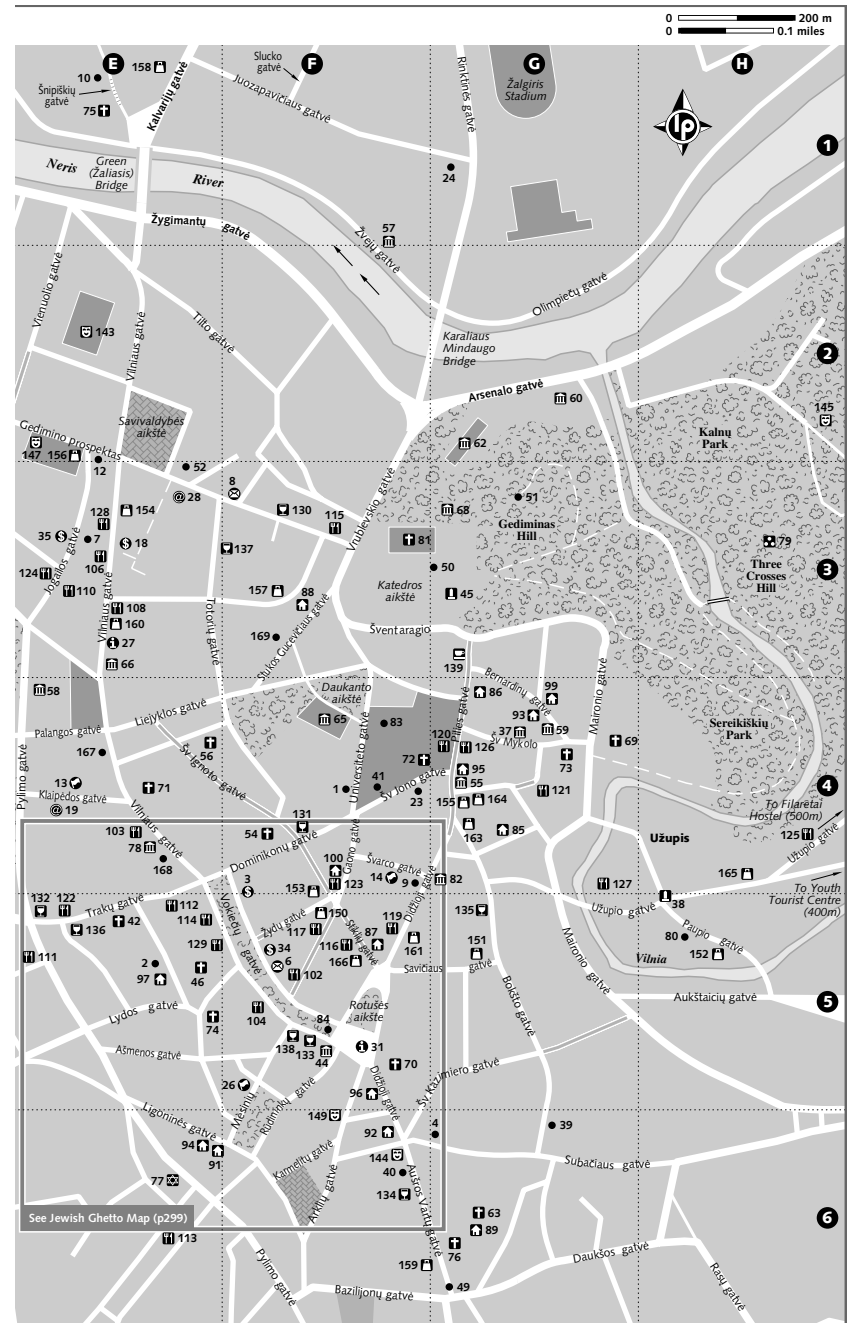
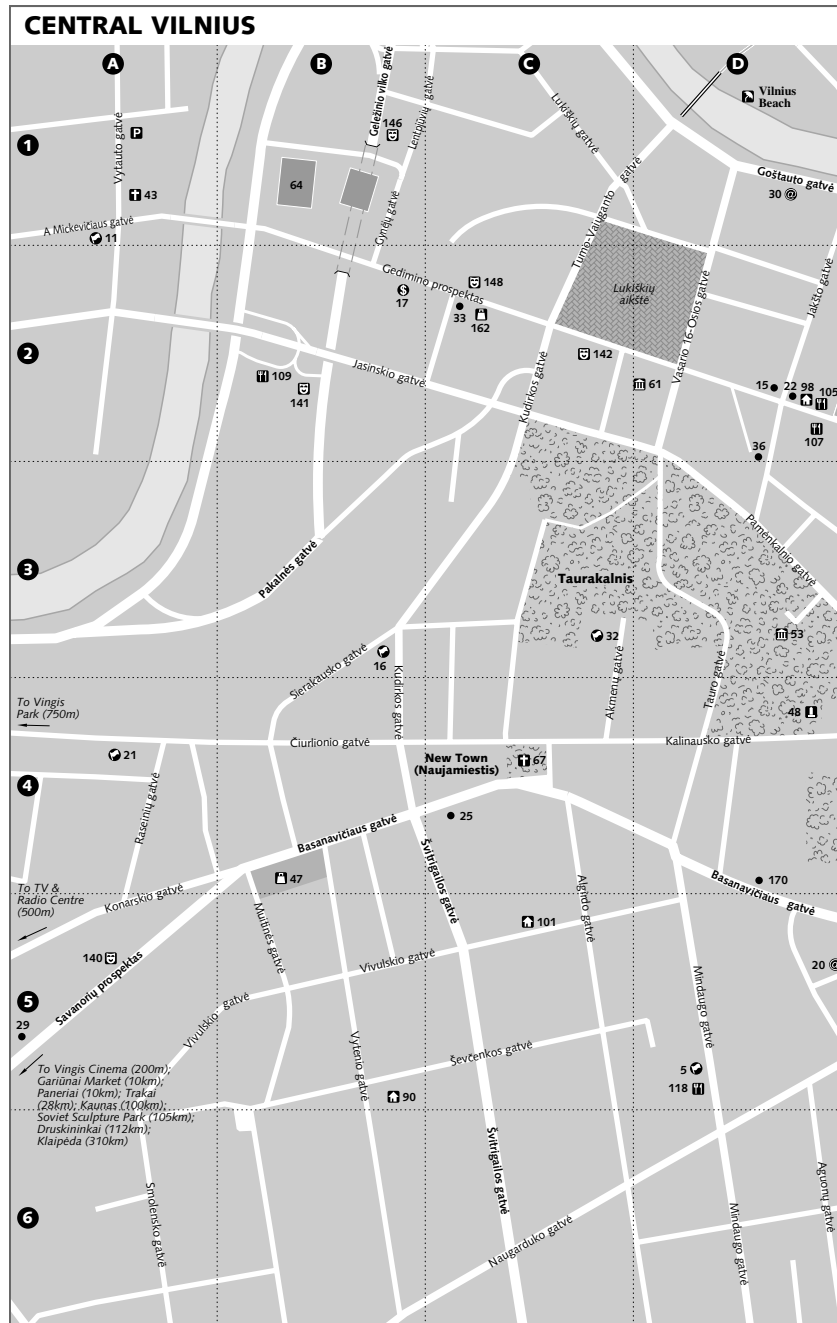
**West Express** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 212 2500; www.westexpress.lt; Stulginskio gatvė 5) Ferry tickets for boats departing from Klaipėda for Riga and Tallinn.

## DANGERS &amp; ANNOYANCES

Vilnius is provincial compared to most other world capitals. That said, it definitely pays to be streetwise here. Avoid walking alone on dark streets at night, stash your wallet in a front pocket, and watch for pick-pockets in Old Town and on buses linking the airport with town. Don't hop in a taxi direct from the street; ask your hotel or the restaurant/bar you are leaving to call one for you.

Resident beggars are notorious for hassling tourists on Pilies gatvė. If someone asks for money, give them a yellow pocket-sized card (free at the tourist office) with information in Lithuanian on how they can find help.

Unsavoury tap water (you should drink bottled), crammed trolley buses, minibuses that don't stop when hailed and snail-slow service in some restaurants are minor irritations.



<b>INFORMATION</b>			
Akademėnė knyga.....	1 F4	Omnitel.....	28 E3
American Centre.....	2 E5	Palūstrė.....	29 A5
American Express.....	3 F4	r2e.....	30 D1
Australian Embassy.....	(see 106)	Town Hall Tourist Office.....	31 F5
Baltic Travel Service.....	4 G6	USA Embassy.....	32 C3
Belarusian Embassy.....	5 D5	Vaga.....	33 C2
Branch Post Office.....	6 F5	Vilnius Bankas.....	(see 28)
British Council.....	7 E3	Vilnius Bankas.....	34 F5
Canadian Embassy.....	(see 7)	Vilnius Bankas.....	35 E3
Central Post Office.....	8 F3	West Express.....	36 D2
Centre Culturel Français.....	9 F4		
Collegium.....	(see 95)	<b>SIGHTS &amp; ACTIVITIES</b>	
Committee of Cultural Heritage.....	10 E1	Amber Museum-Gallery.....	37 G4
Dutch Embassy.....	(see 7)	Angel of Užupis.....	38 H5
Estonian Embassy.....	11 A1	Artillery Bastion.....	39 G6
Euro vaistinė.....	12 E2	Basilian Gates.....	40 F6
Finnish Embassy.....	13 E4	Belfry.....	41 F4
French Embassy.....	14 F4	Centre for Stateless Cultures.....	(see 83)
Gedimino vaistinė.....	15 D2	Chapel of the Blessed Mary.....	(see 49)
German Embassy.....	16 B3	Church of the Assumption.....	42 E5
Hansa Bankas.....	17 B2	Church of the Saint Virgin's Apparition.....	43 A1
Hansa Bankas.....	18 E3	Contemporary Art Centre.....	44 F5
Humanitas.....	(see 133)	Equestrian Statue of Gediminas.....	45 G3
Interneto Kavinė.....	19 E4	Evangelical Lutheran Church.....	46 E5
Interneto Kavinė.....	20 D5	Flower Market.....	47 B4
Latvian Embassy.....	21 A4	Frank Zappa.....	48 D4
Lithuanian Customs Department.....	22 D2	Gates of Dawn.....	49 G6
Lithuanian National Commission for Unesco.....	23 F4	Gates of the Royal Palace Pavilion.....	50 G3
Lithuanian State Department of Tourism.....	24 G1	Gedimino Tower.....	51 G3
Lithuanian Student & Youth Travel.....	25 C4	Government.....	52 E3
Littera.....	(see 83)	Holocaust Museum.....	53 D3
Norwegian Embassy.....	26 F5	Holy Spirit Church.....	54 F4
Old Town Tourist Office.....	27 E3	House of Signatories.....	55 G4
		Jesuit Noviciate with St Ignatius' Church.....	56 E4
		Jewish Community of Lithuania.....	(see 58)
		Lithuanian Energy Museum.....	57 F1
		Lithuanian State Jewish Museum of Vilna Gaon.....	58 E4
		Mickiewicz Memorial Apartment & Museum.....	59 G4
		Museum of Applied Arts.....	60 G2
		Museum of Genocide Victims.....	61 D2
		National Museum of Lithuania.....	62 G2
		Opera & Ballet Theatre.....	(see 143)
		Orthodox Church of the Holy Spirit.....	63 G6
		Parliament.....	64 B1
		Presidential Palace.....	65 F4
		Radvilos' Palace.....	66 E3
		Romanovs' Church.....	67 C4
		Royal Palace.....	68 G3
		St Anne's Church.....	69 G4
		St Casimir's Chapel.....	(see 81)
		St Casimir's Church.....	70 F5
		St Catherine's Church.....	71 E4
		St John's Church.....	72 F4
		St Michael's Church.....	73 G4
		St Nicholas' Church.....	74 E5
		St Raphael's Church.....	75 E1
		St Teresa's Church.....	76 G6
		Senamiesčio Gidas.....	(see 40)
		Synagogue.....	77 E6
		Theatre, Music & Cinema Museum.....	78 E4
		Three Crosses.....	79 H3
		Upper Castle Museum.....	(see 51)
		Užupis Republic Constitution.....	80 H5
		Vilnius Cathedral.....	81 F3
		Vilnius Picture Gallery.....	82 G4
		Vilnius University.....	83 F4
		Yellow Double-Decker Bus Tours.....	84 F5

<b>SLEEPING</b>			
Arts Academy Hostel.....	85 G4	Mini Maxima.....	(see 12)
Atrium.....	86 G4	Pegasus.....	119 F5
Centro Klubas.....	87 F5	Pilies keptyklė.....	120 G4
CityPark Hotel.....	88 F3	Saint Germain.....	121 G4
Domus Maria.....	89 G6	Skonis ir Kvpas.....	122 E5
E-Guest House.....	90 B5	Stikliai Aludė.....	123 F4
Grotthaus.....	91 E6	Sue's Indian Raja.....	124 E3
Grybas House.....	92 F6	Tores.....	125 H4
Litinterp.....	93 G4	Trattoria Da Antonio.....	126 G4
Mano Liza.....	94 E6	Užupis Kavinė.....	127 G4
Narutis.....	95 G4	Za Za.....	128 E3
Radisson SAS Astorija.....	96 F5	Žemaičių Smuklė.....	129 E5
Šauni Vietelė.....	97 E5		
Scandic Neringa.....	98 D2	<b>DRINKING</b>	
Shakespeare.....	99 G4	Aviyls.....	130 F3
Stikliai.....	100 F4	Cozy.....	131 F4
Telecom Guest House.....	101 C5	Fashionbar.....	132 E5
		Gras'as.....	133 F5
		Ibish Lounge.....	134 F6
		Iki Aušros.....	(see 136)
		Mano Klubas.....	135 G5
		Pablo Latino.....	136 E5
		Paparazzi.....	137 F3
		Šokoladas.....	(see 112)
		Savas Kampas.....	138 F5
		Soprano.....	139 G3
		Ephesus.....	(see 112)
		Guru.....	108 E3
		Iki.....	109 B2
		Ikiukas.....	110 E3
		Ikiukas.....	111 E5
		Keisti Ženkliai.....	112 E5
		Kineret.....	113 E6
		La Pergola.....	(see 91)
		La Provence.....	114 E5
		Literatų Svetainė.....	115 F3
		Lokys.....	116 F5
		Markus ir Ko.....	117 F5
		Maxima.....	118 D5
		Trasa.....	148 C2
		Youth Theatre.....	149 F6
		<b>SHOPPING</b>	
		Aldona Mickuviėnė's Workshop.....	150 F5
		Aukso Avis.....	151 G5
		Black Ceramics Centre.....	152 H5
		Bronė Daškevičienė's Workshop.....	(see 150)
		Elementai.....	153 F4
		Flagman.....	154 E3
		Gedimino 9.....	(see 52)
		Gintaras.....	155 G4
		Gintaras.....	(see 134)
		Grand Duke Palace.....	156 E2
		Jonas Bugailiškis' Workshop.....	(see 159)
		Juozas Statkevicius.....	157 F3
		Kalvarijų Market.....	158 E1
		Kristijonas ir Karolina.....	159 F6
		Lino Namai.....	160 E3
		Ramunė Piekautaitė.....	161 F5
		Šokoladas.....	162 C2
		Šokoladas.....	163 G4
		Sauluva.....	164 G4
		Užupis Blacksmith.....	
		Museum-Gallery.....	165 H4
		Vitražo manufaktūra.....	(see 116)
		Zoraza.....	166 F5
		<b>TRANSPORT</b>	
		Bikeworld.....	167 E4
		Ecolines.....	168 E4
		Eurolines Baltic International.....	(see 7)
		Europcar.....	169 F3
		Krantas Travel.....	(see 58)
		Liturimex.....	170 D4
		Rent a Car Litinterp.....	(see 93)

## SIGHTS

Those in Vilnius for the weekend will scarcely move out of Old Town, where souvenir stalls, folk-artist workshops and design boutiques jostle for attention with a treasure-trove of architectural gems. Stay a couple more days and the new town – with its museums, shops and riverside action – beckons.

### Gediminas Hill

Vilnius was founded on 48m-high **Gediminas Hill** (Map pp292-3), topped since the 13th century by a red-brick tower. The original tower was a tier higher than the 20m edifice that marks the spot today. Its walls were ruined during the Russian occupation (1655-61), but it was restored in 1930 to house the **Upper Castle Museum** (Aukštutinės pilies muziejus; Map pp292-3; ☎ 261 7453; Arsenalo gatvė 5; adult/child 4/2Lt, guided tour 15Lt; ☎ 10am-7pm May-Oct, 11am-5pm Tue-Sun Nov-Apr).

The Renaissance ushered in the **Royal Palace** (Valdovų rūmai; Map pp292-3). A quadran-

gle of four wings enclosing a vast courtyard measuring 10,000 sq metres, the palace buzzed with masked balls, gay banquets and tournaments during the 16th century. Between 1632 and 1648 the first Lithuanian operas were performed here. But in 1795, because of the Russian occupation of Lithuania, the palace – as well as the Lower Castle and the city defence wall – was demolished.

Currently being rebuilt red brick by red brick, this palace of incredible dimensions will rise from the ashes on 6 July 2009 to mark the millennium anniversary of the first mention of Lithuania in writing.

Exhibitions on the reconstruction project occupy the pavilion and the **Museum of Applied Arts** (Taikomosios dailės muziejus; Map pp292-3; ☎ 262 8080; www.muzejiai.lt; Arsenalo gatvė 3a; adult 8Lt; ☎ 11am-6pm Tue-Sat, to 4pm Sun), located in the old arsenal at the foot of Gediminas Hill. The museum's permanent collection showcases 15th- to 19th-century

Lithuanian sacred art. Much of it was only discovered in Vilnius cathedral in 1985 after being hidden in the walls by Russian soldiers in 1655. Because of the fear that they'd be seized by the Soviets, the gems, valued at €11 million, remained a secret until 1998, when they were finally displayed to the world.

Sitting stoically next door, the **National Museum of Lithuania** (Lietuvos nacionalinis muziejus; ☎ 262 9426; www.lnm.lt; Arsenalo gatvė 1; adult/child 4/2Lt, guided tour 15Lt; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat, 10am-3pm Sun May-Sep, 10am-6pm Wed-Sun Oct-Apr) has exhibits looking at everyday Lithuanian life before WWII.

### Cathedral Square

Katedros aikštė – a square set to make your dreams come true (p296) – buzzes with local life. In the 19th century markets and fairs were held here and a moat ran around what is now the square's perimeter so ships could sail to the cathedral door. Within the

moat were walls and towers, the only remaining part of which is the 57m-tall **belfry** (Map pp292-3) near the cathedral's western end.

At the square's eastern end is an **equestrian statue of Gediminas** (Map pp292-3), built on an ancient pagan site. Behind the grand old duke, **Sereikiškis Park** (Map pp292-3) leads to **Three Crosses Hill** (p299) and **Kalnų Park** (Map pp292-3).

### TOP FIVE PANORAMAS

For a breathtaking cityscape scale:

- Upper Castle Museum (p294) while sightseeing.
- Europa (p313) during a shopping spree.
- Tores (p309) over lunch or dinner.
- Skybar (p311) apéritif in hand.
- TV Tower (p302) while bungee jumping.

**WISH UPON A...**

...star? No. Not in Vilnius. Rather a tile marked *stebuklas* (miracle). It marks the spot on Cathedral Sq where the human chain – formed between Tallinn and Vilnius by two million Lithuanians, Latvians and Estonians to protest Soviet occupation in 1989 – ended. To make a wish, do a clockwise 360-degree turn on the tile. Unfortunately superstition forbids the location of Vilnius' elusive-but-lucky spot to be revealed, meaning you have to search for it yourself.

**CATHEDRAL**

This national symbol was originally used for the worship of Perkūnas, the Lithuanian thunder god. Later the Soviets turned **Vilnius Cathedral** (Arkikatedra bazilika; Map pp292-3; ☎ 261 1127; Katredos aikštė 1; 🕒 7am-7.30pm, Sunday mass 9am, 10am & 11.15am, 7pm) into a picture gallery. It was reconsecrated in 1989 and Mass has been celebrated daily ever since.

The first wooden cathedral was built here in 1387–88. A grander edifice was constructed under Grand Duke Vytautas in the 15th century, which was in Gothic style, but has been rebuilt so often that its old form is unrecognisable. The most important restoration was completed from 1783 to 1801, when the outside was redone in today's classical style. The statues of Sts Helene, Stanislav and Casimir atop are replicas of wooden versions added in 1793 but destroyed under Stalin.

The statues on the cathedral's south side facing the square are Lithuanian dukes; those on the north side are apostles and saints. The interior retains more of its original aspect, though the entrances to the side chapels were harmonised in the late 18th century.

**St Casimir's Chapel** (Map pp292–3) is the showpiece. It has a baroque cupola, coloured marble and granite on the walls, white stucco sculptures, and fresco scenes from the life of St Casimir (who was canonised in 1602 and is Lithuania's patron saint). Find it at the eastern end of the south aisle.

**Old Town**

Eastern Europe's largest old town deserves its Unesco status. The area, stretching 1.5km south from Katedros aikštė, was built up in the 15th and 16th centuries, and its narrow, winding streets, hidden courtyards and lav-

ish old churches retain the feel of bygone centuries. The main axis is along Pilies, Didžioji and Aušros Vartų gatvė. Its approximate boundary, starting from Katedros aikštė, runs along Stuokos-Gucevičiaus, Liejyklos, Vilniaus, Trakų, Pylimo, Bazilijonų, Šv Dvasios, Bokšto, Maironio, Radvilaitės and Sventaragio streets – an area of roughly 1 sq km.

**PILIES GATVĖ**

Cobbled Castle Street – the hub of tourist action and the main entrance to Old Town from Katedros aikštė – buzzes with buskers, souvenir stalls, pedal-powered taxis (p314) and the odd beggar (p291). Until the 19th century, the street was separated from the square by the lower castle wall, which ran across its northern end. Only a gate in the wall connected the two. Notice the 15th- to 17th-century brickwork of Nos 4, 12 and 16 towards the northern end of the street. The act granting Lithuania independence in 1918 was signed in No 26, the baroque **House of Signatories** (Lietuvos nepriklausomybės akto signatarų namai; ☎ 231 4442; Pilies gatvė 26; adult/child 2/1lt; 🕒 8am-5pm Mon-Thu, noon-4pm Fri).

**VILNIUS UNIVERSITY**

Founded in 1579 during the Counter Reformation, **Vilnius University** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 268 7001; www.vu.lt; Universiteto gatvė 5), Eastern Europe's oldest, was run by Jesuits for two centuries and became one of the greatest centres of Polish learning. It produced many notable scholars, but was closed by the Russians in 1832 and didn't reopen until 1919. Today it has 22,500 students and Lithuania's oldest library, shelving five million books. The world's first **Centre for Stateless Cultures** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 268 7293; www.statelesscultures.lt; Universiteto gatvė 5) or those that don't have an army or navy, including Jewish, Roma and Karaimic cultures, is in the history faculty. The Tuesday evening seminars held at 6pm in room No 29 of the faculty are open to everyone; see the website.

The hidden but linked **13 university courtyards** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 268 7298; Universiteto gatvė 3; adult/child 5/2.50lt; 🕒 9am-6pm Mon-Sat Mar-Oct, 9am-5pm Mon-Sat Nov-Feb) are accessed by passages and gates from surrounding streets. The south gate on Šv Jono gatvė brings you into the **Grand Courtyard**. Inside is **St John's Church** (Šv Jono bažnyčia; Map pp292-3; 🕒 10am-5pm Mon-Sat),

founded in 1387 well before the university arrived. Its 17th-century bell tower, standing on the south side of the courtyard, is a distinctive feature in the Vilnius skyline. The arch through the 16th-century building opposite St John's leads to the **Astronomical Observatory Courtyard**, with an old two-domed observatory, the late 18th-century façade of which is adorned with reliefs of the zodiac.

**DAUKANTO AIKŠTĖ**

The exit from the university's **Sarbievijus Courtyard** to Universiteto gatvė brings you into the square opposite the former Bishops' Palace, now the **Presidential Palace** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 266 4011; www.president.lt; Daukanto gatvė 3; admission free; guided tours 🕒 9am-2.30pm Sat), rebuilt in the classical Russian Empire style early in the 19th century. The palace was used by Napoleon during his advance on Moscow, and by his Russian adversary General Mikhail Kutuzov when he was chasing Napoleon back to Paris. Visits by guided tour (in Lithuanian) must be booked in advance; bring your passport to get in.

**MICKIEWICZ MEMORIAL APARTMENT & MUSEUM**

'Lithuania, my fatherland...' is Poland's national romantic masterpiece. It's not surprising when you realise it was Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855) – muse to Polish nationalists in the 19th century – who wrote the infamous line from his poem *Pan Tadeusz*. He grew up near Vilnius and studied at the university (1815–19) before being exiled for anti-Russian activities in 1824. The rooms where he wrote the well-known poem *Gražia* in 1822 are now the **Mickiewicz Memorial Apartment Museum** (Mickėvičiaus memorialinis butas-muziejus; Map pp292-3; ☎ 260 0148; Bernardinų gatvė 11; 🕒 10am-5pm Tue-Fri, to 2pm Sat & Sun).

**ST MICHAEL'S & ST ANNE'S CHURCHES**

Opposite the eastern end of Bernardinų gatvė, 17th-century **St Michael's Church** (Šv Mykolo bažnyčia; Map pp292-3; ☎ 261 6409; Šv Mykolo gatvė 9; 🕒 11am-5pm Mon, to 6pm Wed-Sun) shelters a small museum focusing on 1918–90 architecture.

Vilnius' cobbled streets were lower than they are today. For a peek at street level in the 15th century, nip into the **Amber Museum-Gallery** (Gintaro Muziejus-Galerija; Map pp292-3; ☎ 262 3092; admission free; Šv Mykolo gatvė 8; 🕒 10am-7pm). The usual array of amber trin-

kets and jewellery to buy are displayed on the ground floor, but the small exhibition on amber in the basement is interesting – not least for its archaeological excavations. Ceramics were fired in the two kilns in the 15th century.

Sixteenth-century **St Anne's Church** (Šv Onos bažnyčia; Map pp292-3; ☎ 261 1236; Maironio gatvė 8) is so fine that Napoleon wanted to take it back to Paris in the palm of his hand. A gem of Gothic architecture, its sweeping curves and delicate pinnacles frame 33 different types of red brick.

**DIDŽIOJI GATVĖ**

Old Town's main artery continues south from Pilies gatvė, past the **Vilnius Picture Gallery** (Vilniaus Galerija Paveikslų; Map pp292-3; ☎ 212 4258; Didžioji gatvė 4; adult/child 2/1lt; 🕒 noon-6pm Tue-Sat, to 5pm Sun), filled with 16th- to 20th-century Lithuanian art, and the city's oldest baroque church, **St Casimir's** (Šv Kazimiero bažnyčia; Map pp292-3; ☎ 212 1715; Didžioji gatvė 34). Its dome and cross-shaped ground plan defined a new style for 17th-century churches when the Jesuits built it between 1604 and 1615. Under tsarist rule St Casimir's was taken by the Russian Orthodox church and given an onion dome, removed in 1942. Under Soviet rule it was an atheism museum.

Didžioji gatvė widens at its southern end into **Rotušės aikštė** (Town Hall Sq). The former town hall in the middle of the square has been here since the early 16th century, but its classical exterior dates from 1785 to 1799. Today it houses the tourist office.

Opposite, excellent installation art and photography by Lithuanian and foreign avant-garde artists fills the **Contemporary Art Centre** (Šiuolaikinio meno centras; SMC; Map pp292-3; ☎ 262 3476; www.cac.lt; Vokietijų gatvė 2; adult/child 6/3lt; 🕒 11am-6.30pm Tue-Sun).

**AUŠROS VARTŲ GATVĖ**

Vilnius' oldest street is laden with churches and souvenir shops. The famous 16th-century **Gates of Dawn** (Aušros Vartai; Map pp292-3) at the top of the street are the only gates of the original nine in the town wall still intact.

A door on the street's eastern side opens onto a staircase that leads to the 18th-century **Chapel of the Blessed Mary** (Map pp292-3; 🕒 6am-7pm, mass 9am Mon-Sat, 9.30am Sun) above

the gate arch. This houses a miracle-working icon of the Virgin, reputed to have been souvenired from the Crimea by Grand Duke Algirdas in 1363, though more likely dating from the 16th century. It is revered by the deeply Catholic Polish community and is one of Eastern Europe's leading pilgrimage destinations.

Heading north along Aušros Vartų gatvė, Catholic **St Teresa's Church** (Šv Teresės bažnyčia; Map pp292-3; Aušros Vartų gatvė 14) looms up large – early baroque outside and ornate late baroque inside. Underneath its entrance is a chamber for the dead.

The late baroque archway known as the **Basilian Gates** (Map pp292-3; Aušros Vartų gatvė 7) forms the entrance to the decrepit Holy Trinity Basilian monastery complex. Almost opposite is the pink-domed 17th-century **Orthodox Church of the Holy Spirit** (Šv Dvasios cerkvė; Map pp292-3; Aušros Vartų gatvė 10), Lithuania's chief Russian Orthodox church. In a chamber at the foot of a flight of steps in front of the altar (you can even see their feet peeping out) lie the preserved bodies of three 14th-century martyrs – Sts Anthony, Ivan and Eustachius.

#### ARTILLERY BASTION

Follow the old wall around from the Gates of Dawn on to Šv Dvasios gatvė, then continue north to reach the **Artillery Bastion** (Artilerijos bastėja; Map pp292-3; ☎ 261 2149; Bokšto gatvė 20/18; admission 2Lt; ☎ 10am-5pm Wed-Sun). This 17th-century fortification houses a collection of old weaponry and armour. Lovers smooch here at sunset.

#### REBELS WITH A CAUSE

The cheeky streak of rebellion pervading Lithuania flourishes in Vilnius' bohemian heart, where artists, dreamers, drunks and squatters in Užupis have declared a breakaway state.

The Užupis Republic (Užupio Republika) was officially, in an unofficial sense, born in 1998. The state has its own tongue-in-cheek president, anthem, flags and a 41-point **constitution**, which, among other things, gives inhabitants the right to hot water, heating in winter and a tiled roof; the right to be unique, to love, to be happy (or unhappy) and to be a dog. It ends 'Don't conquer. Don't defend. Don't surrender'. Read the entire thing in English, French or Lithuanian on a wall on Paupio gatvė (Map pp292-3).

On April Fool's Day, citizens of the Republic of Užupis celebrate their wholly unofficial state. Border guards wearing comical outfits stamp passports at the main bridge and the Užupis president makes speeches in the quarter's small square – the intersection of Užupio, Maluno and Paupio gatvės where the republic's symbol, the **Angel of Užupis** (Map pp292-3), stands. Increasingly hip and trendy, art galleries and folk artist workshops (p305) are mushrooming here like there's no tomorrow.

#### VILNIUS GATVĖ & AROUND

Four sizable Catholic church and monastery complexes chiefly dating from the 17th- and 18th-century baroque era overlook the corner of Vilniaus gatvė and Dominikonų gatvė. Among them, **Holy Spirit Church** (Šv Dvasios bažnyčia; Map pp292-3; ☎ 262 9595; cnr Dominikonų & Šv Ignoto gatvė) is Vilnius' primary Polish church (1679). Once attached to a Dominican monastery, it has a splendid gold and white interior and a labyrinth of cellars concealing preserved corpses. The two towers of peach and creamy-white **St Catherine's Church** (Šv Kotrynos bažnyčia; Map pp292-3; Vilniaus gatvė 30) were once part of a Benedictine monastery.

Memorabilia from stage and screen stars at the **Theatre, Music & Cinema Museum** (Teatro, muzikos ir kino muziejus; Map pp292-3; ☎ 262 2406; www.ltmkm.lt; Vilniaus gatvė 41; adult/student 4/2Lt; ☎ noon-6pm Tue-Fri, 11am-4pm Sat). Its show of traditional musical instruments – including a *pūslinė* (a primitive Baltic string instrument made from animal bladders) and several *kanklės* (plucked, fretted string instruments) – is enchanting.

Symbolic of the incredible renovation sweeping through Old Town is the recently reconsecrated **Church of the Assumption** (Map pp292-3; Trakų gatvė 9/1). Dubbed 'Sands Church' after the quarter in which it stands, this 15th-century Franciscan church was a hospital for the French army in 1812 and state archives from 1864 to 1934 and 1949 to 1989. The building was returned to the Archbishopric of Vilnius in 1995 and to Franciscan friars three years later.



Other churches include the **Jesuit Noviciate with St Ignatius' Church** (Šv Ignoto bažnyčia; Map pp292-3; Šv Ignoto gatvė) and **St Nicholas' Church** (Šv Mikalojaus bažnyčia; Map pp292-3; Šv Mikalojaus gatvė), Lithuania's oldest Gothic church, founded by Germans around 1320. In a courtyard, the revamped **Evangelical Lutheran Church** (Evangelikų liuteronų bažnyčia; Map pp292-3; ☎ 262 6046; www.icvilnius.org; Vokiečių gatvė 20; English service ☎ 9.30am Sun), dating from 1553, is home to Vilnius' tiny Protestant community. Under the Soviets a concrete floor split the church into workshop and basketball court.

**Radvilos' Palace** (Radvilų rūmai; Map pp292-3; ☎ 212 1477; Vilniaus gatvė 41; adult/student 5/2.50Lt; ☎ noon-6pm Tue-Sat, to 5pm Sun), a 17th-century residence, houses the foreign fine-arts section of the Lithuanian Art Museum.

West of Vilniaus gatvė, rock'n'roll legend **Frank Zappa** (Map pp292-3; Kalinausko gatvė 1) is immortalised in a 4.2m-high bronze bust – flanked by a swirling psychedelic mural. It was the world's first memorial to the off-beat American who died from cancer in 1993.

#### East of Gediminas Hill

You could be in danger of crossing a border without realising it when you walk across the Vilnia River into Užupis. This Montmartre of Vilnius has declared itself an independent republic!

#### THREE CROSSES

East of Gediminas Hill, **Three Crosses** (Trys kryžiai; Map pp292-3) stand majestically atop Three Crosses Hill (Trijų kryžių kalnas). Crosses have stood here since the 17th century in memory of three monks who were crucified on this spot. The remains of three crosses lie in the shadow of the erect ones. These are the original hill monuments, which the Soviets bulldozed after WWII. In the spirit of Lithuania the people rebuilt them but left the twisted remains of the originals as a historical reminder of oppression. Walk to them from Kosciuskos gatvė.

#### STS PETER & PAUL'S CHURCH

Don't be fooled by the uninspiring exterior of **Sts Peter & Paul's Church** (Šv Petro ir Povilo bažnyčia; Map pp288-9; ☎ 234 0229; Antakalnio gatvė 1). Its baroque interior – an orgy of thousands of ornate white sculptures created by Italian sculptors between 1675 and 1704 – is breathtaking. The church was founded by Lithuanian noble Mykolas Kazimieras Paca, whose tomb is on the right of the porch.

#### ANTAKALNIS

One of Eastern Europe's most beautiful graveyards lies in this leafy suburb, a short stroll east of the centre. Those killed by Soviet Special Forces outside the parliament on 13 January 1991 are buried in **Antakalnis Cemetery** (Map pp288-9), off Karių kapų gatvė. A sculpture of the Madonna cradling her son memorialises them. Another memorial honours Napoleonic soldiers who died of starvation and injuries in Vilnius while retreating from the Russian army; the remains of 2000 of them were only found in 2002.

On All Saints' Day (1 November) thousands of people flock to the cemetery to light candles by the graves to respect the dead.

#### RASŲ & MILITARY CEMETERIES

Vilnius' **Rasų and Military Cemeteries** (Sukilėlių gatvė) face each other in the southeastern

## JERUSALEM OF THE NORTH

One of Europe's prominent Jewish communities flourished in prewar Vilnius (Vilne in Yiddish), but Nazi and Soviet brutality virtually wiped it out. Now the Jewish quarter is being rebuilt – amid raging controversy in a country still haunted by the spectre of anti-Semitism.

The history of Vilnius is indebted to Jewish culture. Three thousand Jews settled in Vilnius eight centuries ago at the invitation of Grand Duke Gediminas (1316–41). Vilnius rabbi and scholar Gaon Elijah ben Shlomo Zalman (1720–97) led opposition to the widespread Jewish mystical movement Hassidism. In the 19th century Vilnius became a centre for the European Jewish language, Yiddish. Famous landscape artist Isaak Levitan (1860–1900) and, later, the sculptor Jacques Lipchitz (1891–1973; p325) were Vilnius Jews. The city's Jewish population peaked on the eve of WWI at almost 100,000 (out of 240,000 in Lithuania).

Plagued by discrimination and poverty, the Jewish community diminished in the interwar years when Vilnius was an outpost of Poland. Despite this, Vilnius blossomed into the Jewish cultural hub of Eastern Europe, and was chosen ahead of the other Yiddish centres, Warsaw and New York, as the headquarters of the Yiddish-language scientific research institute YIVO in 1925 (the institute stood on Vivalskio gatvė). There were 100 synagogues and prayer houses and six daily Jewish newspapers.

Today there are just 5000 Jews in Lithuania, 80% of whom live in Vilnius. During the *perestroika* years an estimated 6000 Jews left for Israel. In 1996, following years of bickering, Germany agreed to pay €1 million to Lithuania to compensate holocaust survivors and victims of Nazi persecution. Further media attention was focused on the community in 1999 when the Holocaust Museum in Washington apologised for selling a satirical CD entitled *Songs of Kovno (Kaunas) Ghetto*. The lyrics blamed Lithuania for the death of the Jewish community, sparking off old debates about whether Lithuanian sidekicks were as cruel in the Vilnius holocaust as their German masters.

In 2002 Lithuania handed hundreds of Torah scrolls that survived the holocaust to Israelis in a ceremony in Vilnius. The move was an apology to Israel for the part Lithuanians played in the devastating massacre of most of the country's 240,000 Jews.

## Jewish Quarter & Ghettos

The Jewish quarter lay in the streets west of Didžioji gatvė. Today the street names Žydu (Jews) and Gaono (Gaon) are among the few explicit reminders of this. The 1572 **Great Synagogue** (Map p299) and its famous 1902 **Strashun Library** (Map p299) stood at the western end of Žydu gatvė; the site is home to a nursery school today.

Virtually all Vilnius' Jewish organisations, except communist ones, were dissolved when the Soviet Union took over eastern Poland in September 1939. Many Jewish leaders were deported. Meanwhile Polish Jews fleeing the Nazis arrived here as refugees. Vilnius fell to the Nazis two days after their invasion of the USSR on 22 June 1941. In the next three months some 35,000 Jews – almost half those in the city – were murdered in Paneriai Forest (p315), before a ghetto was established in a small area north of Vokiečių gatvė, which was the heart of the Jewish quarter. This first ghetto – known as the **Small Ghetto** (Map p299) – was liquidated after 46 days and its inhabitants killed at Paneriai; a memorial plaque outside Gaono gatvė 3 remembers the 11,000 Jews marched to their death from this ghetto between 6 September and 20 October 1941. For 80 years preceding 1941, the building at Gaono gatvė 6 (today the Austrian embassy) was a Jewish

end of Old Town. Founded in 1801, Rasų Cemetery is the resting place for the Vilnius elite. More interesting, however, is the small military cemetery opposite, where the heart of the Polish Marshal Józef Piłsudki, responsible for Poland's annexation of Vilnius in 1921, is buried. His mother shares his heart's grave and his body is buried in Kraków.

## New Town

The 19th-century new town (Naujamiestis) stretches 2km west of the cathedral and Old Town.

Heading a little away from the action, **Romanovs' Church** (Map pp292-3; Basanavičiaus gatvė) is an eye-catching Russian Orthodox church with pea-green onion domes built in 1913. Further is Vilnius' fabulous

house of prayer. At Žydu gatvė 3, outside the **former home of Gaon Elijah** (Map p299), is a **memorial bust** (Map p299), erected in 1997 on the 200th anniversary of the death of the sage who recited the entire Talmud by heart at the age of six.

Vilnius' **Large Ghetto** (Map p299), created on 6 September 1941 south of Vokiečių gatvė, lasted until the general liquidation of ghettos on Himmler's orders in September 1943, when 26,000 people were killed at Paneriai and a further 10,000 herded off to concentration camps. About 6000 Vilnius Jews escaped. The single gate of the main ghetto stood at what's now Rūdninkų gatvė 18, marked with a plaque bearing a detailed map of the former ghetto. The former **Judenrat** (ghetto administration building; Map p299) was at Rūdninkų gatvė 8; its courtyard shelters a commemorative plaque to 1200 Jews selected to be sent to Paneriai.

## Jewish Quarter Controversy

Restoration of the Jewish ghetto is underway at a cost of €32 million. The Great Synagogue, the area around Žydu gatvė, and plots in Rūdninkų gatvė and near the French embassy between Švarco gatvė and Šv Jono gatvė are being reconstructed. It is both a tribute to the perished community and a resurrection of the lost culture. Despite the plans being formally adopted by parliament in 2000, there was outspoken opposition. Most controversially, MP Vytautas Sustauskas claimed Lithuania would 'be turned into slaves of the Jews' in an outrageous outburst that inflamed simmering anti-Semitic sentiment. And as the project would develop much of the remaining lucrative property in the Old Town, there is little hope of it fizzling out. For more information, contact the **Centre for Tolerance** (Map p299; ☎ 663 818; Naugarduko gatvė 11), the rebuilding nerve centre.

## Jewish Museums, Synagogues & Cemeteries

One of the few Vilnius ghetto survivors helped found the **Lithuanian State Jewish Museum of Vilna Gaon** (Lietuvos valstybinis Vilniaus Gaono žydu muziejus; Map pp292-3; ☎ 261 7907; www.jmuseum.lt; adult/child 4/2Lt; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Thu, to 4pm Fri & Sat) inside the **Jewish Community of Lithuania** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 261 3003; www.litjews.org; Pylimo gatvė 4; admission free; ☎ 9am-3pm Mon-Fri). Powerful B&W photographs portray the holocaust and those who helped save Jews, and guided tours of Jewish Vilnius in English can be arranged. A visit to the museum's other section, the **Holocaust Museum** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 262 0730; Pamėnkalnio gatvė 12; admission by donation; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Thu, 9am-4pm Fri, 10am-4pm Sun), in the so-called 'Green House', is equally moving. The exhibition is a stark reminder of the true horror suffered by Lithuanian Jews in an 'unedited' display of horrific images and words.

Modern Vilnius' only **synagogue** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 261 2523; Pylimo gatvė 39), currently being renovated, was built in 1894 for the wealthy and survived only because the Nazis used it as a medical store. Restored in 1995, it is used by a small Orthodox community.

The Soviets liquidated several Jewish cemeteries in the 1950s. The old Jewish cemetery where Rabbi Gaon Elijah was originally buried was ripped up in 1957 and turned into a sports stadium (Žalgiris Stadium). The *maceivas* (tombstones) were recycled in the city as paving stones; the steps leading up Tauro Hill to the Trade Union Palace on Mykolaičio-Putino gatvė were originally built from Jewish gravestones. In 1991 the Jewish community retrieved many of these desecrated *maceivas*. Gaon Elijah is now buried in the **new Jewish cemetery**, north of Vingas Park in the Virsuliskės district (entrance on Ažuolyno gatvė).

**flower market** (Map pp292-3; Basanavičiaus gatvė 42; ☎ 24hr).

West of Jasinskio gatvė is a **kenessa** (Map pp288-9; Liubarto gatvė 6), a traditional Karaites prayer house (p316).

## GEDIMINO PROSPEKTAS

Sandwiched between the Roman Catholic cathedral's dramatic skyline and the silver

domes of the Russian Orthodox **Church of the Saint Virgin's Apparition** (Map pp292-3), fashionable Gedimino is the main street of modern Vilnius. Its 1.75km length is dotted with shops, a theatre, banks, hotels, offices, a few park squares and the seat of various official bods, including that of the Lithuanian **government** (Map pp292-3; www.lrv.lt; Gedimino prospektas 11) and parliament. Laid out in



1852, the sparkling street has had 11 name changes since: the tsarists named it after St George, the Poles after Mickiewicz, and the Soviet rulers first after Stalin, then Lenin.

**Gedimino 9** (Map pp292-3; Gedimino prospektas 9) – the Harrods or Bloomingdale of Vilnius – is scheduled to open for business in 2007 in a stunningly renovated historic building covering 18,000 sq metres. Investment in the upmarket mall is €50 million. Another classy shopping centre (Karen Millen has already bought up shop space in it) will open in the salmon-pink and cream **Grand Duke Palace** (Map pp292-3; Gedimino prospektas 20/1).

Outside **parliament** (Seimas; Map pp292-3; www.seimas.lt; Gedimino prospektas 53), concrete slabs with mangled barbed wire and daubed slogans are poignant reminders of Lithuania's violent past. Barricades were erected here on 13 January 1991 to protect parliament from Soviet troops. Thousands of people gathered at the building. The barricades to the north of the parliament building were left in place until December 1992, when the last Russian soldier left Vilnius.

Lenin stood on **Lukiskių aikštė**, a square that used to bear the name of the levelled statue, now displayed in Druskininkai's Soviet sculpture park (p326). The KGB – and during the Nazi occupation, the Gestapo – was headquartered in the late-19th-century building facing this square. Part of it today houses the horrific **Museum of Genocide Victims** (Genocido aukų muziejus; Map pp292-3; ☎ 249 6264; Aukų gatvė 2a; adult/audioguide 2/8Lt; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat, to 3pm Sun). Memorial plaques honouring those who perished in 1945 and 1946 tile the outside of the building. Inside, inmate cells and the execution cell where prisoners were shot or stabbed in the skull between 1944 and the 1960s can be visited. In 1994 the remains of 766 victims killed here between 1944 and 1947 were found in a mass grave in **Tuskulėnai Park** (Map pp288-9), north of the Neris. In 2005 they were reburied in the park in a state-of-the-art cone-shaped **memorial chapel** (Map pp288-9; Žirmūnų gatvė) built in memory of 20th-century terror victims. Disturbingly, the graveyard of those killed by the KGB in the 1950s, reckoned to be within a 30km radius of Vilnius, has not yet been found.

#### VINGIS PARK

Just over 1km southwest of parliament, at the western end of Čiurlionis gatvė, is the

wooded **Vingis Park** (Map pp288-9), surrounded on three sides by the Neris and pierced with a large **open-air amphitheatre** (Map pp288-9) used for the Lithuanian Song and Dance Festival. Take trolleybus 7 from the train station or 3 from the Gedimino stop on Vrublevskio gatvė to the Kęstučio stop (the second after the bridge over the river), then walk over the footbridge from the end of Treniotos gatvė.

Like the more distant TV Tower (below), the **TV & Radio Centre** (Map pp288-9; cnr Konarskio gatvė & Pietario gatvė), near the southeastern edge of the park, was stormed by Soviet tanks and troops in the early hours of 13 January 1991. Wooden crosses remember Lithuania's independence martyrs.

#### ŠNIPISKĖS

On the north bank of the Neris, the quarter of Šnipiškės has been transformed: the tatty Soviet concrete blocks have gone and in their place is a new skyline of skyscrapers, including the **Europa Tower** atop the **Europa Business & Shopping Centre** (Map pp288-9; Europos aikštė), which – at 129m – is the Baltics' tallest skyscraper. The brainchild of Vilnius mayor Artūras Zuokas, this new business district dubbed 'Sunrise Valley' had reaped €142 million in investments by 2005 and promises to net €800 million in all by 2010. As part of the urban redevelopment project, two new bridges linking it with the centre have been built and the **municipality** (Map pp288-9; Konstitucijos prospektas 3) has moved here. A state-of-the-art conference centre is planned for Šnipiškės' rapidly growing skyline.

There are fine examples of Soviet architecture on this side of the river: **St Raphael's Church** (Map pp292-3; SvRapolo bažnyčia) near Žaliasis tiltas (Green Bridge) has a fine baroque interior. A nuclear power plant and other Soviet (and subsequent) energy-making means are the industrial focus of the **Lithuanian Energy Museum** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 278 2085; Žvejų gatvė 14a; ☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Fri), in the city's original power plant. The edifice went up in 1901, was destroyed during WWII, rebuilt, and powered the city until 1998.

#### TV Tower

The 326m **TV tower** (Televizijos Bokstas; Map pp288-9; ☎ 204 0333; www.lrtc.lt; Sausio 13-osios gatvė 10; adult/child 15/6Lt; observation deck ☎ 10am-10pm) symbolises Lithuania's strength of spirit. On

#### BEGINNING WITH A

'We want to show the world how a little nation fought for its independence; show how dear, how valuable, independence itself is.'

*Juozas Aleksiejūnas, former inmate, KGB Prison*

Juozas Aleksiejūnas, a tour guide at the Museum of Genocide Victims, was in his 80s when he died. Against all the odds, he survived Vilnius' KGB prison – an appalling house of horrors where blood still stains the walls of the cramped cells in which prisoners lived and died. His story, told before he died, is a proud but harrowing one.

Aleksiejūnas joined the partisan Resistance movement in 1944. As one of the country's estimated 40,000 'forest brothers', he roamed the forests around Molėtai, 75km north of Vilnius, with five other 'brothers'. His official task was to steal identity forms from the local passport office to pass on to fellow partisans.

On 26 March 1945 he was arrested by the KGB and tried for anti-Soviet activities. Within minutes he was found guilty and his ordeal in Vilnius' KGB prison, notorious for its high security and inhumane disciplinary measures, began.

Between 1944 and 1953, 200,000 Lithuanians passed through the Soviet prisons. The one in Vilnius was used for equally sinister purposes by the Gestapo during the Nazi occupation; its execution ward, various torture chambers and 9m-square cells where up to 20 prisoners were kept at any one time all remain today. Inmates were showered once a month and only allowed to go to the bathroom once a day; at other times, a bucket in the cell doubled as toilet pan.

Aleksiejūnas was interrogated and tortured for a week. 'How many of you are there?' and 'Who is your leader?' were the questions fired at him. Prisoners did not have names. They were called 'Beginning with A', 'Beginning with B' and so on to ensure prisoners knew as little about each other as possible. Inmates who attempted conversation were sent to an isolation cell, stripped to their underwear, rationed to 300g of bread and half a litre of water a day and deprived of sleep.

Inmates who refused 'to talk' to KGB officers were sent to the 'soft cell'. Its walls were padded in 1973 to muffle the hideous human cries and the sound of beatings. Prisoners were put in straitjackets and forced to sit in the pitch-black, silent cell until their spirit broke. Aleksiejūnas survived the soft-cell hell.

After three days in the 'wet room' he lost consciousness. This 8 x 10m punishment cell had a sunken floor covered with cold water, which turned to ice in winter. In the centre was a slippery metal pedestal, 30cm in diameter, which was the prisoners' only refuge from the wet floor.

Aleksiejūnas was later moved to another prison in Vilnius and on 29 June 1945 he was deported to Vorkuta, Siberia, where he spent five years in a hard labour camp followed by another five years in a high-security prison. In 1955 he was released on parole. But he was not allowed to leave Vorkuta and had to report twice a month (which he did for nine years) to the prison's special commander. His Lithuanian wife, whom he married in 1943 (but had barely seen since), joined him in Vorkuta where their first son was born. The Aleksiejūnas family returned home to Vilnius in 1963.

13 January 1991 Soviet special forces killed 12 people here. Lithuanian TV kept broadcasting until the troops came through the tower door. Wooden crosses remember the victims and on 13 January hundreds of people light candles here. At Christmas 6000-odd fairy lights are strung on the tower to create the world's largest Christmas tree!

From the observation deck (165m), accessible via an elevator, there is an extraordinary city panorama. Steel stomachs can eat while feasting on views at **Paukščių takas**

(Map pp288-9; ☎ 252 5338; meals 15-40Lt; ☎ 10am-10pm; ☎ ), a revolving restaurant in the tower. The fearless/senseless can hurl themselves 168.8m off the tower at a petrifying 104km/h during Europe's highest **bungee jump** (☎ 8-635 17828; www.bungee.lt; rates per jump 200Lt, per person for groups of 5/7 170/150Lt; ☎ May-Oct).

To get to the tower, take trolleybus 16 from the train station or 11 from Lukiskių aikštė to the Televizijos Bokstas stop on Laisvės prospektas. A trip here takes you to Vilnius' Soviet-era high-rise suburbs.

## WALKING TOUR

Eastern Europe's largest old town is made for meandering. This itinerary is a taster for those with just a few hours to spare.

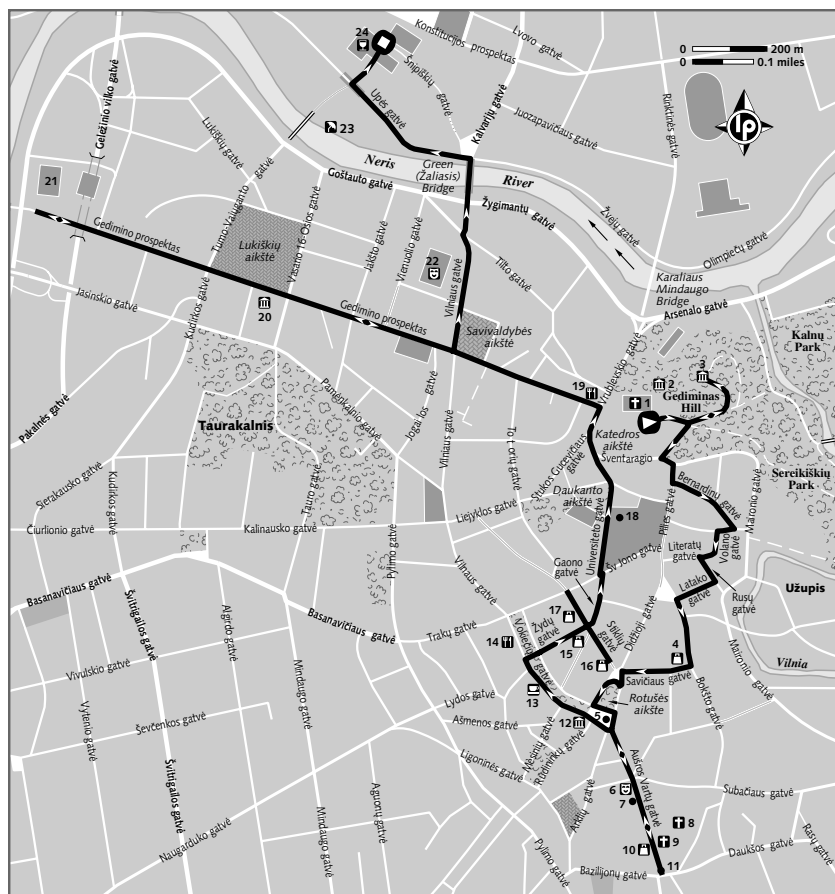
Kick off on Cathedral Sq, taking in its magical tile, **cathedral** (1; p296) and **Royal Palace** (2; p294) before climbing through the park to the **Upper Castle Museum** (3; p294) atop Gediminas Hill. From the tower survey the city then hike down into Old Town along

### WALK FACTS

**Distance:** 3.5km (plus two 700m add-ons)

**Duration:** one hour (brisk pace), half day (meandering)

Pilies gatvė. To shake off the crowd and get an authentic taste of quaint old Vilnius, cut left onto Bernardinų gatvė and zigzag along Volano gatvė, Literatų gatvė, Rusų gatvė and Latako gatvė to Bokšto gatvė. Midway along Bokšto, turn right onto Savučiaus gatvė for the best of Lithuanian textiles at **Auko Avis** (4; p313). Continue along Savučiaus to Didžioji gatvė, turn left and follow the street past the **former town hall** (5) to its southern end. Continue along Aušros Vartų, past the **National Philharmonic** (6; p312), which is under renovation, the **Basilian Gates** (7; p298), the **Orthodox Church of the Holy Spirit** (8; p298), **St Teresa's Church** (9; p298) and **artist workshops** (10) before stopping at the sacred **Gates of Dawn** (11; p297).



## CRAFTY VILNIUS

Lithuanian folk art is alive and well, as the clutch of enchanting folk-artists' workshops tucked in Old Town proves.

**Aldona Mickuvienė's workshop** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 216 5063; Žydų gatvė 2-10) and **Bronė Daškevičienė's workshop** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 275 9116; vlado@defi.lt; Žydų gatvė 2-9) Two elderly ladies have been weaving colourful wedding sashes in their neighbouring workshops for decades. Buy a ready-made sash (50Lt) or order one with your name on it (70Lt). Each sash takes a full day or more to weave.

**Black Ceramics Centre** (BCC; Map pp292-3; ☎ 8-699 42456; http://ceramics.w3.lt; Paupio gatvė 5) Ceramics as black as coal have been crafted since prehistoric times. See the end result at this innovative Užupis art centre.

**Jonas Bugailiškis** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 261 7667, 8-652 36613; Aušros Vartų gatvė 17-10) Angels, jumping horses, donkeys and a menagerie of other animals and toys carved from wood ensures this workshop buzzes with life. Making traditional folk-music instruments is the folk artist's other love.

**Sauluva** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 212 1227; Literatų gatvė 3; ☎ 10am-7pm) Learn how to make *verbos* (traditional woven dried flowers crafted to celebrate Palm Sunday) and paint traditional Lithuanian Easter eggs at this shop-cum-workshop.

**Užupis Blacksmith Museum-Gallery** (Užupio kalvystės muziejus galerija; Map pp292-3; Užupio gatvė 26) Forged-iron articles are sold at this traditional blacksmith's; demonstrations Tuesday, Friday and Saturday.

**Vitražo manufaktūra** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 212 1202; www.stainedglass.lt; Stiklių gatvė 6-8; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Fri, to 4pm Sat) Stained-glass sculptures, wall murals and mobiles fill this creative stained-glass workshop; daily demonstrations noon to 4pm.

Next, backtrack to Rotušės aikštė where the **Contemporary Art Centre** (12; p297) awaits. Quench your thirst on a **café terrace** (13) on Vokiečių gatvė or lunch at **Žemaičių Smuklė** (14; p309), then cross the street and cut through the alleyway onto Žydų gatvė for a glimpse of Jewish Vilnius. Wander north along Jewish St, pausing to watch wedding sashes being woven at more **folk-artist workshops** (15). Take in the design boutiques, such as **Zoraza** (16; p313) and **Elementai** (17; p313), on Stiklių gatvė then continue south along Gaono gatvė to **Vilnius University** (18; p296) on Universiteto gatvė.

Exhausted? Cut back onto Cathedral Sq and flop on the terrace at **Literatų Svetainė** (19; p310). Still raring to go? Add on an amble west along Gedimino prospektas to the **Museum of Genocide Victims** (20; p302) and **parliament barricades** (21; p302) or cut north along Vilniaus gatvė, past the **Opera & Ballet Theatre** (22; p312), to the river. Cross the bridge and splash around on **Vilnius Beach** (23) or be dazzled in Šnipiškės' sky-high **Skybar** (24; p311).

## VILNIUS FOR CHILDREN

Palm tree-studded **Vilnius Beach**, on the Neris' northern bank, keeps kids cool on steaming summer days. There's sand to play with, a pool to splash in, a snack bar, a couple of beach volleyball courts and a small skateboard park. In town, the **electric cars** in

Sereikiškių Park (Map pp292-3) are popular, as are the horse-drawn carriages (p305) and pedal-powered taxis (p314) that loiter near the park entrance on Cathedral Square. Otherwise, there's nothing like a sky-high panorama (p295), spooky ghost walk or ride on an open-top bus (p306) to impress.

In winter the best place for kidding around is Akropolis (p313), which has an **ice-skating rink** (☎ 238 7852; 5/7Lt before/after 1.30pm Mon-Fri, 7/9Lt Sat & Sun; ☎ 8am-midnight), 20-lane **Apollo Bowling Alley** (☎ 238 7777; 30/40Lt per hr before/after 6pm Mon-Thu, 50Lt/hr Sat & Sun; ☎ 9am-4am) with eight automatic lanes for kids, and **soft play area** (☎ 238 7848; under/over 4yr 15/20Lt per week; ☎ 10am-10pm) for under 12s.

## TOURS

Walking tours (in English) of Užupis (52Lt, 2½ hours), Old Town (35Lt, two hours) and Vilnius' ghostly haunts (69Lt, two hours) can be booked in advance at any tourist office (p291).

**Horse-drawn carriages** (☎ 260 8410; tourism.vilnius@mail.lt; Katedros aikštė; ☎ May-Sep) In summer these carriages take tourists for romantic rides around Sereikiškių Park (60Lt/hr, daily) and Old Town (80Lt, Saturday and Sunday).

**Senamiesčio Gidas** (Old Town Guides; Map pp292-3; ☎ 8-699 54064; www.vilniuscitytour.com; Aušros Vartų gatvė 7) Organises half-day minibus tours of Vilnius (€23, 3½ hours) and Jewish Vilnius, as well as 'Trace your Family

Roots' tours and day trips to Trakai (p315) and Kernavė (p318), Lithuania's Soviet sculpture park (p326) and Europe's geographical centre (p318). Prices – see its website – depend on numbers.

**Yellow double-decker bus** (☎ 273 8625; www.vap.lt; 1hr tour adult/child 10/5Lt, departures 3pm, 5pm & 6.30pm Wed-Fri, 11am & 3pm Sat & Sun; 2hr tour adult/child 25/10Lt, departures 12.30pm Wed-Fri, 12.30pm & 5pm Sat & Sun) For a whirl in an open-top bus, pitch up at the bus stop on Rotušės aikštė and pay the driver.

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Vilnius enjoys a rich pageant of festivals (www.vilniusfestivals.lt):

**Užgavėnės** Pagan carnival (Mardi Gras) on Shrove Tuesday, February.

**Kaziukas crafts fair** Held in Old Town to celebrate St Casimir's Day, 4 March.

**Lygiadienis** Pagan carnival marking spring equinox, March.

**Vilnius Festival** Classical music, jazz and folk music concerts in Old Town courtyards, June.

**Christopher Summer Festival** (www.kristupofesti.valiai.lt) Music festival, July and August.

**Vilnius Days** International arts festival, mid-September.

**Sirens** International theatre festival, end September–mid-October.

## SLEEPING

The hotel business is young, and while there is a plethora of magical top-end options the city does lack decent budget accommodation. That said, hoteliers are starting to pounce on this glaring gap in an otherwise well-filled market. Prices include breakfast unless stated otherwise.

### Budget GUESTHOUSES

Collegium (p290) has 12 Old Town rooms with shower and toilet for 90Lt per person.

**Litinterp** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 212 3850; www.litinterp.lt; Bernardinų gatvė 7-2; s/d/tr 100/160/210Lt, with shared bathroom 80/140/180Lt, apt from 200Lt; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat; ☎ ☒ ☒) This efficient accommodation agency runs its own charming guesthouse above its office and arranges B&B accommodation in private homes. Rates are lower in winter and guests can check in after office hours providing they give advance notice.

**Sauni Vietelė** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 212 2189; sauni.vietele@takas.lt; Pranciškonai gatvė 3/6; s 120Lt, d 150Lt & 170Lt, 2-room apt 220Lt) This four-room guesthouse above a crumbling courtyard café in

### GAY & LESBIAN VILNIUS

The scene is low-key and underground. For general information, chat rooms and guides, contact Vilnius-based **Lithuanian Gay League** (☎ 233 3031; www.gay.lt; PO Box 2862, Vilnius), which publishes a solid entertainment guide in English online. Gals can befriend the Lithuanian lesbian league **Sappho** (www.is.lt/sappho; PO Box 2204, Vilnius).

**Men's Factory** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 8-699 85009; www.gayclub.lt; Švencenos gatvė 16/10; admission 5-40Lt; ☎ 7pm-6am Wed & Thu, 10pm-6am Fri & Sat) Buzz at the steely door of this ravishingly popular gay club to penetrate its hardcore underground scene. Door policy is strict but fair. Look for the line-up of flags outside.

Old Town makes a refreshing change from the chic designer norm. Rooms – unbeatable value for money – are vast, boast dark furnishings and flouncy charm despite their age. The lovely old building was a Franciscan abbey in a previous life.

### HOSTELS

**Old Town Hostel** (Map pp288-9; ☎ 262 5357; booking@lithuanianhostels.org; Aušros Vartų gatvė 20-15; dm 32Lt, d/tr with shared bathroom 100/120Lt, 2-/3-person apt 120/150Lt; ☎ ☒) These 25 beds – a two-minute signposted walk from the train and bus stations – fill up fast. A centuries-old courtyard location makes it Vilnius' most atmospheric hostel and the place to meet fellow backpackers. Non-HI members pay 2Lt more, sheets/laundry are 2/10Lt and Internet access is free on two computers in the noisy kitchen where guests slug free tea and coffee.

**AAA Hostel** (Map pp288-9; ☎ 8-680 18557; www.aaahostel.lt; Šv Stepano gatvė 15; dm in 4-bed r 41-51Lt, dm in 8-bed r 31Lt; ☎ ☒) Squeakier than squeaky-clean is the hallmark of this modern hostel where the interior decoration screams colour. Dorms are mixed and Internet access is free for 10 minutes then 7Lt an hour. Locker padlocks – to take home when you leave – cost 10Lt and breakfast (9Lt) is served in a café down the street.

**Filaretai Hostel** (Map pp288-9; ☎ 215 4627; www.filaretaihostel.lt; Filaretų gatvė 17; dm 28Lt, s/d/tr with shared bathroom 65/90/105Lt May-Sep, dm 23Lt, s/d/tr with shared bathroom 65/80/90Lt Oct-Apr; ☎ ☒ ☒ ☒) Affiliated with the Lithuanian Hostels Association,

Filaretai has five- to eight-bedded dorms; bed linen and towels are provided (pay a 3Lt surcharge the first night); and it has a washing machine (10Lt), kitchen and satellite TV. Breakfast costs 6Lt, a locker costs 3Lt and non-HI members pay 4Lt more per night. To get here take bus 34 from the bus and train stations to the seventh stop.

**Arts Academy Hostel** (VDA Hostel; Map pp292-3; ☎ 212 0102; Latako gatvė 2; dm 18Lt, bed in d 26-30Lt, bed in tr 22-26Lt mid-Jul–mid-Sep, s/d/tr 43/76/99Lt year-round) The budget-conscious won't get cheaper than this concrete block, stumbling distance from Pilies gatvė – home to Art Academy students in term time. Little English is spoken.

### HOTELS

**Ecotel** (Map pp288-9; ☎ 210 2700; www.ecotel.lt; Slucko gatvė 8; s/d/tr 169/189/240Lt; ☎ ☒ ☒ ☒) The first of a new breed of hotel, this economy-driven hotel is a steal. Simple but smart furnishings fill 168 squeaky-clean rooms, in which bathrooms have heated towel rails. There is a computer with free Internet access in the lobby, and some rooms are designed for both disabled travellers and tall people – beds are 2.10m long. Rates are 10Lt less per person on Saturday and Sunday.

**Panorama Hotel** (Map pp288-9; ☎ 273 8011; www.hotelpanorama.lt; Sodų gatvė 14; s/d/tr 149/179/249Lt; ☎ ☒) A Soviet-era hotel that surprises: dig beneath its kitsch, chocolate-brown tiled façade to find a bright and airy train-station hotel with great Old Town views from its northern side. A currency exchange, ATM and free Internet access in the lobby ease the ride for new arrivals.

### Midrange

**Mano Liza** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 212 2225; www.hotel.invilnius.lt; Ligoninės gatvė 5; d 280Lt, 1-/2-bedroom ste 360/400Lt) Each room is different at Mano Liza, tucked in a late-19th-century building in the Old Town heart. Rooms on the top floor are smaller and have sloping ceilings and some have a fridge.

**Grybas House** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 212 1854; www.grybashouse.com; Aušros Vartų gatvė 3a; s/d 280/380-450; ☎ ☒) Stase and Vldas run Grybas House – the first independent family-run hotel to crop up after independence – with grace, charm and bags of smiles. Some rooms peep at a pretty courtyard off Aušros Vartų gatvė and breakfast happens in a cosy cellar bar.

### THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

**Domus Maria** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 264 4880; http://domusmaria.vilnensis.lt; Aušros Vartų gatvė 12; dm/s/d/tr/q/ste 75/179/249/279/299/250Lt; ☎ ☒) No guesthouse better reflects the Vilnius soul than Domus Maria. With rooms sheltered in the cells of a Carmelite monastery that was attached to St Theresa's Church and the Gates of Dawn in the 17th century, the place oozes atmosphere and charm. Architecturally faithful to its monastic origins, rooms off long corridors are arranged around an interior courtyard. Rooms 207 and 307 – the only hotel rooms in Vilnius with a Gates of Dawn view – are booked months in advance. Breakfast is served in the vaulted refectory, original 18th-century frescoes decorate the conference room and one floor is kitted out for disabled travellers. To top off its appeal, Domus Maria touts eight doubles and two six-bedded rooms with shared bathrooms – stunning value at 75Lt per person – for those with less worldly wealth.

**Telecom Guest House** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 264 4861; www.telecomguesthouse.lt; Vivalskio gatvė 13a; s/d/ste 240/328/320Lt, s/d/tr/q with shared bathroom 75/120/180/220Lt; ☎ ☒) One of Vilnius' best-kept accommodation secrets, this dynamic hotel within walking distance of the madding Old Town crowds touts cheaper rooms in an unrenovated building as well as regular rooms with three-star comforts. Hotel parking is free.

**Scandic Neringa** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 268 1910; neringa@scandic-hotels.com; Gedimino prospektas 23; d/ste from 297/456Lt; ☎ ☒) One of the few preindependence old girls still on the scene, 60-room Neringa has hit lucky again. The few fabulous 1970s Soviet touches it has retained (take its restaurant with mosaic floor, frescoed wall and tinkling fountain) are now retro, while recent renovations add a tasteful touch of comfort. Breakfast on the street terrace is a pleasure and every room is kettle-equipped.

**Centro Klubas** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 266 0860; www.centroklubas.lt; Stiklių gatvė 3; s/d 320/360Lt; ☎ ☒) The bizarre décor of this Old Town hotel – life-sized windmill in the lobby, horseshoe on each door and farm utensils on the walls – doesn't quite gel. That said, rooms are huge

and some have a kitchenette and/or interior balcony (overlooking the windmill!). Parking/breakfast is 25/19Lt a night.

**E-Guest House** (Map pp288-9; ☎ 266 0730; www.e-guesthouse.lt; Ševčenkos gatvė 16; d/tr/apt 180/210/240Lt; 📍 📺 📶) This hi-tech hotel with bold blue exterior and free Internet connection throughout runs a handy rent-a-laptop service. The quarter in which it stands is a building site as neighbours get spruced up, but it's definitely up-and-coming. The city's premier gay club (p306) shares the same courtyard.

**Atrium** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 210 7777; www.atrium.lt; Pilies gatvė 10; s/d/tr/ste 300/350/799Lt; 📍 📺 📶) One floor inside this 15th-century town house is kitted out for disabled travellers. Its restaurant, in a courtyard off Pilies gatvė, cooks up meaty Argentinean cuisine. Rooms otherwise are standard midrange to top-end options in the tourist heart of Vilnius.

**Reval Hotel Lietuva** (Map pp288-9; ☎ 272 6272; www.revalhotels.com; Konstitucijos prospektas 20; s/d/ste from 380/449/794Lt; 📍 📺 📶) Once a seedy Soviet landmark, sky-rise Reval rose like a phoenix from the flames into the swankiest hotel in Vilnius' business sector. The 22nd-floor Skybar (p311) is a Vilnius highlight; the hotel is a free wi-fi zone and reception rents bicycles (25/50Lt per half/full day).

**CityPark Hotel** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 210 7461; www.citypark.lt; Stuokos-Gucevičiaus gatvė 3; s/d/ste from 360/480/660Lt; 📍 📺 📶) With a chef from Sicily and smart rooms overlooking the cathedral, this enviably located hotel hovers near the top-end fringe. Since its small 16-room beginnings, it has blossomed into a 77-room modern block. But be prepared to cough up extra for parking (€10 per night) and breakfast (28Lt).

## Top End

Vilnius boasts a divine selection of hotels for the well-heeled; most lounge in Old Town.

**Stikliai** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 264 9595; www.stikliaihotel.lt; Gaono gatvė 7; s/d/ste 604/725/966Lt; 📍 📺 📶) The cream of the crop is tucked down a picture-postcard cobbled street in the old Jewish quarter and named after the glass-blowers who had their workshop in the 17th-century pad on Stikliai gatvė (Glass Blowers St).

**Radisson SAS Astorija** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 212 0110; reservations.vilnius@radissonSAS.com; Didžioji gatvė 35/2; s/d/ste €179/189/400Lt; 📍 📺 📶) This mint-green classical wonder – a hotel since 1901 –

overlooks St Casimir's Church. Its winter-time Sunday brunches (65Lt) are renowned, and trouser press, safe and self-regulating heating/air-con are standard. Business-class rooms boast added luxuries, such as king-sized bed, bathrobe, slippers, iron, tea/coffee-making facilities and free Internet access (everyone else pays €15 per 24 hours).

**Narutis** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 212 2894; www.narutis.com; Pilies gatvė 24; s/d/ste weekdays 450/680/900, weekends 383/578/850Lt; 📍 📺 📶) Housed in red-brick town house built in 1581, this classy pad has been a hotel since the 16th century. Breakfast and dinner is served in a vaulted Gothic cellar, wi-fi access is free in public areas, and free apples at reception add a tasty touch. Narutis earns five stars because of its cellar swimming pool.

**Shakespeare** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 266 5885; www.shakespeare.lt; Bernardinų gatvė 8/8; s/d/ste from €105/174; 📍 📺 📶) Striving to be the best of boutique hotels, Shakespeare is a refined Old Town gem that evokes a cultured, literary feel with its abundance of books, antiques and flowers. Each room pays homage to a different writer – in name and design.

**GrotthusHotel** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 266 0322; www.grotthushotel.com; Ligoninės gatvė 7; d 420-560Lt, ste 700Lt; 📍 📺 📶) Step through the red-canopied entrance of this buttercup-yellow townhouse to find Villeroy & Boch bathtubs, 19th-century Titanic-style fittings, Italian-made furniture and curtains allegedly made with the same fabric as that used by the queen of England! The restaurant, La Pergola (meals 70Lt to 100Lt), with tables on an English lawn, is as regal.

**Holiday Inn** (Map p288-9; ☎ 210 3000; www.holidayinnvilnius.lt; Šeimyniškių gatvė 1; s/d/ste 483/587/656Lt; 📍 📺 📶) This chain hotel within a two-minute dash of the business district is sleek. Rooms have loudspeakers in bathrooms allowing guests to catch the morning news in the shower. Two floors are no smoking and the executive floor and small gym on the top floor proffers skyscraper views. Outside/garage parking costs 25/40Lt.

## EATING

Whether it's curry, *cepelinai* or *kepta duona* you want, Vilnius has a mouth-watering selection of local and international cuisine. That said, traditional food has survived the Western dining take-over bid and it's still very easy to feast on delicious Lithuanian

## THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

**Zemaičių Smuklė** (Samoģitian Tavern; Map pp292-3; ☎ 261 6573; Vokiečių gatvė 24; meals 50Lt) Sorrel soup with country sausage and quail eggs, duck soup, rabbit stew and wild boar roast with asparagus and green pepper sauce are delectables to gorge on at this rustic inn. A meat-eater's paradise, the culinary hardy can hog down boiled pigs ears and trotters or a half-metre long eel, while dining trios can share a Landlord's Skillet – a feast of piggie bits, duck thighs, pork shank, sausage and bacon with sauerkraut, mustard and horseradish sauce. An entire piglet, stuffed and roasted (order 24 hours in advance; 160Lt), is just the thing for a hungry party of five. Summertime seating is around wooden benches and cartwheels on cobblestones or up top among Old Town church steeples and terracotta rooftops.

cuisine. Dining after midnight is more challenging. Listed prices include a starter or dessert, a main course and a soft drink.

## Lithuanian

**Aukštaičiai** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 212 0169; Antokolskio gatvė 13; meals 40-100Lt) Boasting a fabulous terrace that fills half the length of a cutesy Old Town street, this traditional restaurant oozes charm. It cooks up breakfast until 11am, moves onto cabbage soup with mushrooms served in a loaf of bread for lunch, and proffers a wealth of tasty meats for dinner.

**Markus ir Ko** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 262 3185; Antokolskio gatvė 11; meals 50-100Lt) Next-door neighbour to Aukštaičiai, with an equally charming terrace on the other half of the same cutesy street, Markus is a long-time favourite that remains top-notch for sweet, succulent, melt-in-your-mouth steak – at half the price you'd pay in any other European capital.

**Stikliai Aludė** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 262 4501; Gaono gatvė 7; meals 50-100Lt) Waving distance from the latter two street terraces, this one is another gorgeous, shaded and busy place. Get here early to snag a table outside or descend to the cellar for an authentic Lithuanian dining experience at the hands of traditionally dressed maidens.

**Tores** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 262 9309; Užupio gatvė 40; meals 30-50Lt) Feast your tastebuds on a plentiful mix of Lithuanian and European dishes

and your eyes on a stunning Old Town panorama at this well-placed eating and drinking hang-out, atop a hill in bohemian Užupis. Užupio Radijas airs tunes in the basement.

**Čili Kaimas** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 231 2536; Vokiečių gatvė 8; meals 15-30Lt; ☎ 10am-midnight Sun-Thu, to 2am Fri & Sat) Hens cluck around in a glass enclosure at this cheerful farmstead where waitresses wear traditional dress, and mushroom soup is served inside a brown-bread loaf (5.90Lt). This is very much a winter hide-out. There is a summer terrace opposite.

**Lokys** (The Bear; Map pp292-3; ☎ 262 9046; Stiklių gatvė 8; meals 50-100Lt) Hunt down the big wooden bear outside to find this Vilnius institution, a cellar maze going strong since 1972. Game is its mainstay, with delicacies like beaver-meat stew with plums and roast boar luring the culinary curious. Folk musicians play here in summer.

**Za Za** (Map pp292-3; Vilniaus gatvė 19; meals 25Lt) Pizza gets fused with dumplings and cocktails at this chic, far-from-strictly-Lithuanian hybrid eating and drinking spot where *koldūnai* (ravioli stuffed with meat or mushrooms) come boiled or roasted.

## European

**Saint Germain** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 262 1210; Literatų gatvė; meals 30Lt) Paris is the inspiration behind this idyllic wine bar-cum-restaurant inside a convivial century-old brown-shuttered house on a quiet Old Town street. Advance reservations for its street terrace are essential.

**Guru** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 212 0126; Vilniaus gatvė 22/1; meals 25Lt; ☎ 7am-9pm Mon-Fri, 9am-8pm Sat & Sun) Guru is a Zen salad lounge, decked out in a soothing and minimalist fashion. Floor-to-ceiling windows and crisp white linen set off a bold choice of soups (eight) and salads (50) – a perfect and peaceful pad for lunch with the girls.

**La Provence** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 261 6573; Vokiečių gatvė 24; meals 100Lt) Boiled veal tongue in port with king prawns, gorgonzola cheese and capers (46Lt) or pan-fried foie gras atop a bed of apple with caramelised apricot and pearl barley cooked in saffron-spiced orange juice are among the lavish dishes served with a typical French flourish at this elegant restaurant. Its motto is 100% gourmet.

**Literatų Svetainė** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 261 1889; www.literatai.lt; Gedimino prospektas 1; meals 50Lt) This is where the Polish-Lithuanian poet and Nobel Prize-winner Czesław Miłosz watched the Red Army march into Vilnius in June 1940. Today European food (the roast garlic soup is divine, as are its many vegetarian choices), impeccable service and a street terrace with a cathedral view ensures this 19th-century tavern remains top. Orange, amaretto or hazelnut cappuccino makes a sweet coffee stop.

**Čili Pica** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 261 9071; Gedimino prospektas 23; ☎ 7.30am-midnight Sun-Wed, to 3am Thu-Sat) The Lithuanian love affair with the humble pizza continues unabated at this pizza chain, which, unremarkable pizza aside, serves nosh well into the wee hours in Old Town and near the train and bus station.

**Da Antonio I** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 262 0109; Vilniaus gatvė 23; ☎ 261 8341; meals 30Lt) Italian-inspired joints come and go, but Da Antonio has staying power. Italian favourites conjured up in a classical interior woo a faithful crowd that rates Antonio's pizza and pasta – dished up here and at **Trattoria Da Antonio** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 261 8341; Pilies gatvė 20; meals 30Lt) – the best in town.

## International

**Pegasus** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 260 9430; www.restaurantpegasus.lt; Didžioji gatvė 11; meals 50-100Lt) World cuisine takes centre stage at Pegasus, a crisp white lounge with a strong design-led interior and one solitary but fabulous table on a balcony overlooking Didžioji gatvė. Its discreet entrance and live jazz attracts a moneyed local crowd.

**Sue's Indian Raja** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 8-600 27788; Odminių gatvė 3; meals 30Lt) The food served here is by no means the hottest Indian nosh you'll find on the planet, but expats in Vilnius swear by Sue's – and where else in the world will you find an Indian serving carried *cepelinai*?

**Kineret** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 8-656 08927; Šv Stepano gatvė 5; meals 30Lt) The ambience might not be the most inspirational, but Kineret, just around the corner from the synagogue, is the city's only kosher restaurant.

**Balti Drambliai** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 262 0875; Vilniaus gatvė 41; meals 20Lt) An exhaustive choice of cheap vegan and veggie delights from all cuisines renders this heaven for non-meat-eaters.

**Ephesus** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 260 8866; Trakų gatvė 15; kebabs 5Lt; ☎ 11am-1am Mon, to 6am Tue-Sat) Ravenous night owls can munch on a kebab into the really wee hours at this small Turkish joint, complete with occasional belly dancers and water pipes.

## Cafés

**Užupio kavinė** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 212 2138; Užupio-gatvė 2; meals 30Lt) Well away from the trampled tourist trail, this legendary riverside café terrace with artsy clientele is unmatched. A plaque on the wall pays homage to its soul mate – Montmartre, Paris.

**Pilies kepyklėlė** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 260 8992; Pilies gatvė 19) A standout from the crowd on Vilnius' busiest tourist street, Pilies kepyklėlė is an old-fashioned tearoom with a brick and beam interior. The apple strudel and sweet and savoury pancakes (7Lt to 10Lt) are delicious.

**Double Coffee** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 261 4175; Gedimino prospektas 5 & 26) Coffee in all sizes and guises is the speciality of this Starbucks-inspired chain where the menu is delivered to the table in the shape of the *Double Coffee Times* broadsheet.

**Keisti ženklai** (Strange Signs; Map pp292-3; ☎ 261 0779; Trakų gatvė 13; meals 20Lt) 'Enjoy the spirit of modernity' is what you're meant to do at Strange Signs, a café with a strange sign outside and large tasty meals inside.

## THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

**Skonis ir Kvapas** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 212 2803; Trakų gatvė 8; ☎ 9.30am-11pm) Heaven for tea connoisseurs, this stylish courtyard café knows how to make a good cuppa. Pick from a myriad of designer teas (recommended: milky Masala loaded with cinnamon; sweet-and-sour ginger tea with orange juice and honey; or smoked tea with vodka), many of which take a good 15 minutes to brew – so come with your patience hat on. Tea comes by the cup (3Lt to 5Lt) or pot (7Lt), and a sublime array of creamy and homemade cakes, cucumber sandwiches and breakfasts (opposite) top off the tastebud-tempting picture. The terrace is Old Town's most peaceful and shaded; there are rugs to wrap up in on chillier days; and the red-brick fireplace inside is a great wintertime toe-toaster.

## TOP FIVES PLACES TO BREAKFAST...

- if you're hot off the dance floor at 5am – **Cozy** (below)
- on an egg boiled in green tea with toast – **Skonis ir Kvapas** (opposite)
- on pancakes – **Pilies kepyklėlė** (opposite)
- in traditional Lithuanian style – **Aukštaičiai** (p309)
- on a Sunday brunch to last all day – **Radisson SAS Astorija** (p308)

**Soprano** (Central Vilnius Map pp292-3; ☎ 212 6042; Pilies gatvė 3; Vilnius Map pp288-9; Konstitucijos prospektas 3) Soprano sells fruit-topped *gelato Italiano*. Buy a cone (2Lt) to lick on the move or sit on its terrace for the ice cream of your dreams (2Lt to 10Lt).

## Self-Catering

Shopping at the market (p313) for milk, honey and smoked eel aside, self-catering is a doddle with a supermarket on every second street corner. **Iki** (www.iki.lt; ☎ 249 8340; Jasiuskio gatvė 16) and **Maxima** (Map pp292-3; www.maxima.lt; Mindaugo gatvė 11) are leading chains. Both run smaller corner shops: **Ikiukas** (Jogailos gatvė Map pp292-3; ☎ 231 3135; Jogailos gatvė 12; Pylimo gatvė Map pp292-3; ☎ 231 3403; Pylimo gatvė 21) and **Mini Maxima** (Map pp292-3; Gedimino prospektas 64).

## DRINKING

Nightlife is a laid-back affair with many places offering something to eat too. Pubs and bars where punters stand around English-style drinking don't exist; drinking is very much done the Med Europe way, ie seated around tables. In summer Vokiečių gatvė, a street lined with wooden-decking terraces in summer, is an obvious starting point.

**Cozy** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 261 1137; www.cozy.lt; Dominikonų gatvė 10; ☎ 7.30am-6am) Run by hip Bernie and his beaming smile from Holland, Cozy is a hot address. Street level is lounge style with a chef who cooks until 6am, while local DJs spin tunes downstairs to a discerning crowd in the Friday and Saturday night DJ club.

**Skybar** (Map pp288-9; ☎ 272 6272; Konstitucijos prospektas 20; ☎ 4pm-1am Sun-Thu, to 2.30am Fri & Sat) Perched on the 22nd floor of the Reval Hotel Lietuva, this spacey blue bar with red swivel

chairs proffers panorama after panorama. DJs play from 9pm Friday and Saturday.

**Iki Aušros** (Until Dawn; Map pp292-3; ☎ 8-610 04131; Aušros Vartų gatvė 15) Dress up to fit in at the city's premier cocktail bar, which shakes a mean Singapore Sling within a hair's breadth of the sacred Gates of Dawn.

**Ibish Lounge** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 8-680 75462; Aušros Vartų gatvė 11) Two suspended bubble chairs facing the street, sofa seating and a fireplace ensure chic times year-round at Ibish Lounge, a lounge bar owned by Turkish-German Ibish.

**Mano Klubas** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 8-698 27231; www.manoklubas.com; Bokšto gatvė 7) There's a definite industrial air to this student hang-out where the cocktail called Nepristikashkopustelauj-ancho punch might defeat the most nimble of linguists.

**Fashionbar** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 243 0777; www.ftv.lt; Trakų gatvė 2) Lithuanian beauties of both sexes converge at Fashionbar – part of the Fashion TV worldwide franchise – where the cream of Vilnius society hobnobs.

**Contemporary Art Centre** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 261 7097; Vokiečių gatvė 2) The art centre has a smoky hide-out bar filled with arty Lithuanian luvvies and one of the most simple but hip summer terraces in town. At weekends roll up your jeans and hold your nose to enter the aeroplane-style loo.

**Paparazzi** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 212 0135; www.paparazzi.lt; Totorių gatvė 3; ☎ 5pm-3am Mon-Thu, to 6am Fri & Sat, to 3am Sun) Plop yourself down on a green, red or black sofa and look cool –

## THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

**Avilys** (Map pp292-3; Gedimino prospektas 5; beer per litre 13-15Lt) Beehive – a brew pub with a cellar bar and summer street terrace – is the spot to sup authentic Lithuanian beer. The unstrained beer made from wholly natural products comes in three guises: Avilio, a light beer that notches 4.5% on the alcohol barometer; honey beer (hence the name of the place), a medium dark beer with honey aromas which, despite its sweet name, is not sweet; and Korio, which gets its kick from the ginseng thrown in with the hops. If that's not enough, there are beer soup (9Lt) and hot beer grog (9Lt) to warm the cockles in winter, and nonalcoholic beer ice cream (6Lt) to cool down on in summer.

## INDUSTRY NEWS

Intimate, sexy, glamorous and funky is what the legendary **Pacha** (www.pacha.com) club franchise, started way back in 1967 in Ibiza, Spain, prides itself on. And that's precisely what Vilnius clubbers should get when **Pacha Vilnius** (Map pp292-3; www.pacha.com; Gyneju gatvė 14; admission €4-10; ☎ 10pm-6am Thu-Sat) opens its doors in Autumn 2006. Easily the most ambitious project of its kind to date in the Baltics, the venue – a new building being built from scratch behind parliament – will have two dance floors and a capacity of 2500. Europe's top DJs are expected to play here.

someone could be watching you. There are cameras in the loo allegedly.

Also recommended:

**Gras'as** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 212 2031; www.grasa.lt; Vokiečių gatvė 2) Merits one drink for its underground interior between rocks.

**Pablo Latino** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 262 1045; Trakų gatvė 3) Strictly Latin.

**Savas Kampas** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 212 3203; Vokiečių gatvė 4; ☎ 8.30-1am Mon-Wed, 8.30-2am Thu, 8.30-4am Fri, 10-4am Sat, 10-1am Sun) Breakfast, brunch, dinner and drink.

## ENTERTAINMENT

The tourist office publishes events listings, as does the *Baltic Times*.

### Nightclubs

The clubbing scene – young, fresh and dynamic – is at its best in winter when everyone's around. (In summer many go to the seashore to party.) Cozy (p311) is the top spot to pick up flyers for monthly dance parties held by non-club-based party organisers **Ore** (www.ore.lt) and **Boogaloo** (www.boogaloo.lt).

**Gravity** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 249 7966; www.clubgravaity.lt; Jasinskio gatvė 16; admission 20-30Lt) Happening DJs, exotic cocktails and thumping House make this stylish club hot. Think London-style door policy: five bouncers and difficult to get into.

**Galaxy** (Map pp288-9; ☎ 263 6666; www.forum.palace.lt; Konstitucijos gatvė 26; admission variable) Very much an event-led club rather than a weekly haunt, Galaxy is a large amphitheatre-styled space that, DJ depending, draws a large crowd.

**Club Connect** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 212 2031; www.connectclub.lt; Vokiečių gatvė 2; admission 5-15Lt) A lairy Union Jack on the door sets the tone for this Old Town nightclub, which lures a bold, brash, mildly rough set – stags included.

**Trasa** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 249 8258; www.trasa.lt; Gedimino prospektas 39/1; admission 5-10Lt; ☎ 11am-3am Mon-Wed, 11am-4am Thu, 11am-6am Fri, 3pm-6am Sat, 3pm-3am Sun) The bold cellar bar of Trasa thumps with local DJ beats until well after sunrise. Watch your back.

### Cinemas

Find movie listings at www.cinema.lt (Lithuanian only). Films are screened in English at **Coca-Cola Plaza** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 265 6565; www.forumcinemas.lt; Savanorių prospektas 7; admission before 1pm/1-4pm/after 4pm Mon-Fri 8/10/12.20Lt, before/after 1pm Sat & Sun 12.20/15Lt) and at the out-of-town **Forum Cinemas Akropolis** (☎ 248 4848; www.forumcinemas.lt; Ozo gatvė 25; admission before 1pm/1-4pm/after 4pm Mon-Fri 8/10/12.20Lt, before/after 1pm Sat & Sun 12.20/15Lt) in the Akropolis multiplex.

### Theatre & Classical Music

**Oskaras Koršunovas Theatre** (OKT; Oskaro Koršunovo teatro; ☎ 261 1877; www.okt.lt) Lithuania's most innovative, daring and controversial theatre company (p312).

Resident companies perform opera and ballet at the **Opera & Ballet Theatre** (Map pp292-3; Operos ir Baletu Teatras; ☎ 262 0636; www.opera.lt; Vileniuo gatvė 1).

The **Lithuanian National Drama Theatre** (Map pp292-3; Lietuvos nacionalinis dramos teatras; ☎ 262 9771; www.teatras.lt; Gedimino prospektas 4), **Small Theatre of Vilnius** (Map pp292-3; Vilniaus Mažasis Teatras; ☎ 261 3195; www.vmt.lt; Gedimino prospektas 22) and the **Youth Theatre** (Map pp292-3; Jaunimo teatras; ☎ 261 6126; www.jaunimoteatras.lt; Arklių gatvė 5) are the stages for Lithuanian and foreign plays in Lithuanian.

The country's most renowned orchestras perform at **National Philharmonic** (Map pp292-3; Nacionalinė filharmonija; ☎ 266 5233; www.filharmonija.lt; Aušros Vartų gatvė 5), which breaks for summer. The **Lithuanian Music Academy** (Map pp292-3; Lietuvos muzikos akademija; ☎ 261 2691; www.lma.lt; Gedimino prospektas 42) stages concerts all year.

### SHOPPING

Pilies gatvė is something of a bustling craft market, with painters hanging out their masterpieces, and traders behind stalls laden with wooden chopping boards and spoons,

## LITHUANIAN FASHION DESIGN

A stroll in Old Town reveals a band of Lithuanian designers, some well established on the international catwalk, others up and coming.

Crinkled linen designs with free-flowing feminine lines are the trademark of Rita Plioplienė, who named her small boutique for women near the Gates of Dawn after her two children, **Kristijonas** and **Karolina** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 212 0398; Aušros Vartų gatvė 17). **Ramunė Piekautaitė** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 231 2270; Didžioji gatvė 20), a short strut away, is another well-known name to turn her hand to linen. Don't miss the imaginative collection of amber jewellery displayed beneath glass in her boutique.

The Lithuanian master of linen is 38-year-old Giedrius Šarkauskas, who stunned the world in Tokyo, Japan, with his 2005 autumn/winter collection entitled 'Century'. Inspired by life's natural cycle, the designer – who was born deaf – lives out his wholly naturalist philosophy with collections sewn solely from linen. Accessories are made from amber, wood, leather and linen. **Lino Kopos** (Linen Dunes; Map pp288-9; ☎ 275 1200; Krokuvos gatvė 6) is his design studio and shop.

Lithuania's other big name is the flamboyant **Juozas Statkrevičius** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 212 2029, 8-600 87491; Odminių gatvė 11), who is the country's best-known designer and has boutiques in Vilnius, Paris, Palm Beach and New York.

Daiva Urbonavičiūtė fronts the fun and funky fashion house **Zoraza** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 212 0084; Stiklių gatvė 6), where a riot of colours and textures – suede, glitter, beads, felt, crystal, leather and so on – creates an urban, vintage feel. Fashion fiends will adore this Pandora's box of glam funk. On the same street, local fashion designers still seeking fame and fortune pool their creations in **Elementai** (☎ 260 8588; elementai@takas.lt; Stiklių gatvė 14), a fantastic shop crammed with designs by non-names. It sells a few pieces of sculpture, pottery, ceramic and glassware too.

Final stop on the fashion design trail is **Aukso Avis** (Golden Sheep; Map pp292-3; ☎ 261 0421; Savičiaus gatvė 10), a textile gallery established by Vilnius fashion designer Julija Žilėnienė, which sells bags, T-shirts, wall murals and jewellery (think necklaces in felt or wool) made from a rich range of material. The gallery runs courses in knitting, embroidery, wool felting and weaving for those seeking some know-how.

Online, shop for Lithuanian design with Vilnius-based **Ona** (www.ona.com).

cheap amber trinkets, clothing and so on. Amber and linen shops are a dime a dozen, both here and on Aušros Vartų gatvė:

**Gintaras** (Aušros Vartų Map pp292-3; Aušros Vartų gatvė 13; Pilies Map pp292-3; ☎ 8-612 40501; Pilies gatvė 32) Stands out with its beautiful collection of children's wooden toys and dolls as well as standard amber fare.

**Lino Namai** (Linen House; Map pp292-3; ☎ 212 2322; Vilniaus gatvė 22) For table and bed linen.

For clothes, visit a local designer (above).

Gedimino prospektas – the main shopping street – is lined with mainstream fashion shops, the department store **Flagman** (Map pp292-3; Gedimino prospektas 16; ☎ 10am-8pm Mon-Sat, 11am-6pm Sun) and – in 2007 – a couple of state-of-the-art shopping centres (p302). **Sokoladas** (Didžioji Map pp292-3; Didžioji gatvė 42; Gedimino Map pp292-3; Gedimino prospektas 46; Trakų Trakų gatvė 13) sells handmade chocolate.

Away from the centre, **Europa** (Map pp288-9; www.europa.lt; Konstitucijos prospektas 3; ☎ 8am-midnight) in Šnipiškės and **Akropolis** (Map pp292-3;

www.akropolis.lt; Ozo gatvė 25; ☎ 10am-10pm) are shopping and entertainment complexes.

Vilnius has two main markets, the often disappointing **Gariūnai**, to the west, off the Kaunas road, and the food-driven **Kalvarijų** (Map pp292-3; Kalvarijų gatvė 6), where you can join the scrum of babushkas jostling for bargains. Both open sunrise to noon Tuesday to Sunday. Minibuses marked 'Gariūnai' or 'Gariūnų Turgus' ferry shoppers from the train station road every morning. By car it's 11km along Savanorių prospektas from Vilnius centre.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

See p393 for details on links with countries outside the region.

### Air

For international flights to/from Vilnius, see p393. Domestic and inter-Baltic flights are limited. There are five flights weekly to/from Palanga (160Lt one way, 45 minutes)

with Lithuanian Airlines, May to September only. There is at least one flight daily Monday to Friday to/from Riga (from 265Lt one way) with Air Baltic, and to/from Tallinn (from 315Lt) with Air Baltic and Estonian Air. Up-to-date fares are online.

Major airline offices at Vilnius airport:  
**Estonian Air** (☎ 273 9022; www.estonian-air.ee)  
**Lithuanian Airlines** (☎ 252 5555; www.lal.lt)  
**Lufthansa** (☎ 230 6300; www.lufthansa.com)  
**SAS/Air Baltic** (☎ 235 6000; www.sas.lt, www.airbaltic.com)

## Bus

Vilnius **bus station** (Autobusų stotis; Map pp288-9; ☎ 216 2977; Sodų gatvė 22) is opposite the train station. Inside its ticket hall, domestic tickets are sold at six ticket windows from 5.30am to 7.30pm, and information is doled out at the **information office** (informacija; ☎ 1661; www.autobusai.lt; ☎ 6am-9pm). Timetables are displayed on a board here and online. Passenger facilities include left luggage (p290), a pharmacy, ATM, Iki supermarket (p311), bistro and sandwich bar.

Tickets for international destinations, including Riga and Tallinn, are sold at **Eurolines Baltic International** (Map pp288-9; ☎ 233 6666; www.eurolines.lt; Sodų gatvė 22; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm & 2-7pm Sun), with an office in the main hall and in **town** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 269 0000; Jogailos gatvė 4; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 2pm Sat). Buses to destinations within the Baltics include the following:

**Druskininkai** 19Lt, two hours, 10 direct daily.  
**Kaunas** 14.50Lt, two hours, about 20 daily.  
**Klaipėda** 44Lt, five to seven hours, eight daily.  
**Lazdijai** 18-19Lt, three hours, three to six daily.  
**Molėtai** 10Lt, 1½ hours, two daily.  
**Palanga** 47Lt, six hours, about nine daily.  
**Panevėžys** 20Lt, 2¼ hours, about 12 daily.  
**Riga** 40Lt, five hours, four daily.  
**Šiauliai** 29Lt, 4½ hours, seven daily.  
**Tallinn** 90Lt, 12 hours, three daily.  
**Trakai** 3Lt, 45 minutes, about 30 daily.  
**Visaginas** 12Lt, three hours, nine daily.

## Car & Motorcycle

Numerous 24-hour petrol stations selling Western-grade unleaded fuel are dotted around Vilnius.

If you hire a car and intend to cross the border in a Lithuanian-registered car, check the car is insured for inter-Baltic travel. Rental companies:

**Avis Airport** (☎ 232 9316; Town (Map pp288-9; ☎ 230 6820; www.avis.lt; Laisvės prospektas 3)  
**Budget Airport** (☎ 230 6708; www.budget.lt)  
**Europcar Airport** (☎ 216 3442; Town (Map pp292-3; ☎ 212 0207; www.europcar.lt; Stuokos Gucevičiaus 9-1)  
**Hertz Airport** (☎ 232 9301; Town (Map pp288-9; ☎ 272 6940; www.hertz.lt; Kalvarijų gatvė 14)  
**Rent a Car Litinterp** Town (Map pp292-3; ☎ 212 3850; www.litinterp.lt; Bernardinų gatvė 7-2)  
**Rimas Rent a Car** Town (☎ 277 6213, 8-698 21662; rimas.cars@is.lt) Charismatic Rimas rents cheap self-drive cars or you can hire a car with an English-speaking driver.  
**Sixt Airport** (☎ 239 5636; www.sixt.lt)

## Train

The **train station** (Geležinkelio stotis; Map pp288-9; ☎ 233 0087/6; Geležinkelio gatvė 16) is opposite the bus station. The domestic ticket hall is to the left as you face the central station building, and the international ticket hall to the right. Train information and timetables (in English) are available at the information office between the two halls and online at www.litrail.lt.

There is no rail link between Vilnius and Tallinn. For international trains, see p398. Direct daily services within the region to/from Vilnius:

**Ignalina** 10Lt, two hours, seven daily.  
**Kaunas** 11Lt, 1¼ to two hours, 13 to 16 daily.  
**Klaipėda** 40Lt, five to nine hours, three daily.  
**Riga** 46Lt, eight hours, two daily.  
**Šiauliai** 26Lt, 2¼ to 3½ hours, five to eight daily.  
**Trakai** 2.50Lt, 40 minutes, seven daily.

## GETTING AROUND To/from the Airport

**Vilnius International Airport** (☎ 232 9122, information desk ☎ 273 9305/6; www.vilnius-airport.lt; Rodūnė kelias 2) lies 5km south of the centre. Bus 1 runs between the airport and the train station; bus 2 runs between the airport and the northwestern suburb of Šeškinė via the Žalasisis bridge across the Neris and on to Lukiskių aikštė. Minibus 15 also links the airport with town.

A taxi from the airport to the city centre should cost no more than 20Lt.

## Bicycle

The Old Town tourist office (p291) rents bicycles for 1Lt a day plus a copy of your passport. Otherwise, pick up a pedal-powered taxi (20Lt per 30 minutes) from Katedros aikštė or Pilies gatvė.

A key stop for serious cyclists is bike shop **Bikeworld** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 8-686 52924; www.bikeworld.lt; Vilniaus gatvė 37).

## Car & Motorcycle

Vilnius is easy to navigate by car, its traffic burden being light compared to other capitals. Street parking is plentiful and costs 2Lt an hour payable by meter between 8am and 8pm. Cars are not allowed in part of the pedestrian Old Town.

## Public Transport

The city is efficiently served by buses and trolleybuses from 5.30am or 6am to midnight; Sunday services are less frequent. Tickets cost 1.40Lt at news kiosks and 1.10Lt direct from the driver; punch tickets on board in a ticket machine or risk a 20Lt on-the-spot fine.

Nippier minibuses shadow most routes. Minibuses pick up/drop off passengers anywhere en route (not just at official bus stops) and can be flagged down on the street. Tickets costs 2Lt from the driver.

Bus 4 links the train station with Pylimo gatvė. Trolleybus 7 from the train station, or trolleybus 3 from the Gedimino stop on Vrublevskio gatvė near the cathedral, takes you along Jasinskio gatvė, a block south of Gedimino prospektas.

For route details see www.vilniustransport.lt (Lithuanian only).

## Taxi

Taxis officially charge 1Lt to 1.50Lt per kilometre and must have a meter. To avoid getting ripped off or robbed, ask your hotel or the bar/restaurant you are leaving to call you a taxi by telephone (☎ 215 0505, 261 6161, 277 7777). Hopping into a taxi on the street, especially if you are drunk and don't speak Lithuanian, is asking for trouble.

Taxi ranks are numerous and include: outside the train station; in front of the old town hall on Didžioji gatvė; in front of the Contemporary Art Centre on Vokiečių gatvė; and outside the Radisson SAS Astorija hotel.

## AROUND VILNIUS

The centre of Europe, a fairy-tale castle and ancient castle mounds lie within easy reach of the capital. Or there is the trip to Paneriai.

## Paneriai

Here Lithuania's brutal history is starkly portrayed. Over 100,000 people were murdered here by the Nazis between July 1941 and July 1944 at this mass-murder site, 10km southwest of central Vilnius. About half the city's Jewish population – about 35,000 people – had already been massacred here by the end of the first three months of the German occupation (June to September 1941) at the hands of Einsatzkommando 9, an SS killing unit of elite Nazi troops. Lithuanian accomplices are accused of doing as much of the killing as their German overseers.

The forest entrance is marked by a **memorial**, the Panerijų memorialas. The text in Russian, dating from the Soviet period, remembers the 100,000 'Soviet citizens' killed here. The memorial plaques in Lithuanian and Hebrew – erected later – honour the 70,000 Jewish victims.

A path leads to the shocking **Paneriai Museum** (Panerijų muziejus; ☎ 264 1847, 260 2001; Agrastų gatvė 15; ☎ 11am-6pm Wed-Sat Jun-Sep, by appointment Oct-May). There are two monuments here, one Jewish (marked with the Star of David), the other one Soviet (an obelisk topped with a Soviet star). From here paths lead to a number of grassed-over pits where, from December 1943, the Nazis lined up 300 to 4000 victims at a time and shot them in the back of the head. The bodies were then covered with sand to await the next layer of bodies. The Nazis later burnt the exhumed corpses to hide the evidence of their crimes. One of the deeper pits, according to its sign, was where they kept those who were forced to dig up the corpses and pulverise the bones.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

There are about 20 trains daily (some terminating in Trakai or Kaunas) from Vilnius to Paneriai station (1.20Lt, 20 minutes). From **Paneriai station** (Agrastų gatvė) it's a 1km walk southwest along Agrastų gatvė straight to the site.

## Trakai

☎ 528 / pop 6110

Lakeside Trakai, with its red-brick fairy-tale castle and blushing brides in meringue dresses who flock here on Saturdays to have their pic taken, is the quintessential day trip from Vilnius.

Gediminas probably made Trakai, 28km west of Vilnius, his capital in the 1320s and Kęstutis certainly based his 14th-century court here. Protected by the **Trakai Historical National Park** ([www.seniejitrakai.lt](http://www.seniejitrakai.lt)), spanning 80 sq km since 1991, Trakai today is a quiet town blessed with pretty lakes and filled with song each July during the Trakai Festival.

Most of Trakai stands on a 2km-long, north-pointing tongue of land between Lake Luka (east) and Lake Totoriškių (west). Lake Galvė opens out from the northern end of the peninsula and boasts 21 islands.

### INFORMATION

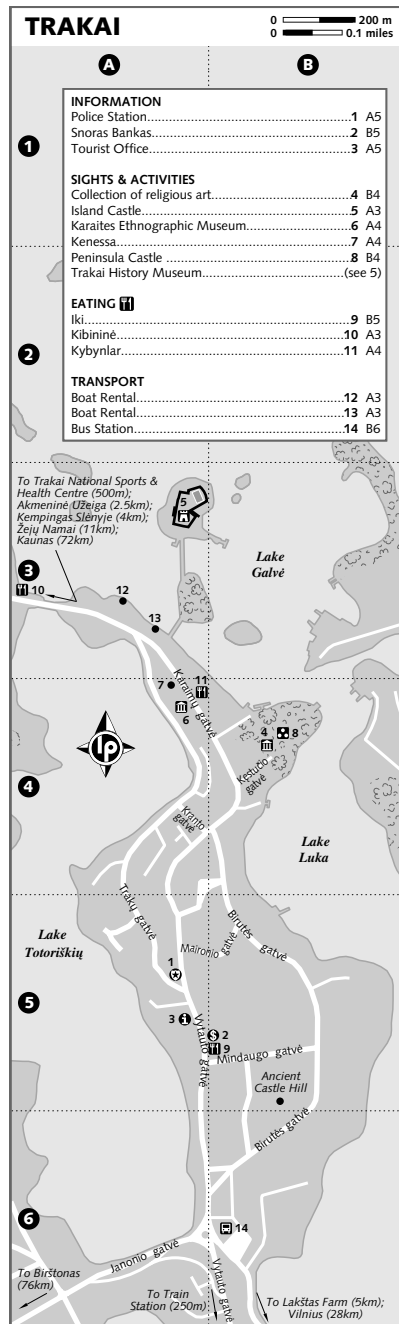
**Snoras Bankas** (Vytauto gatvė 56) ATM and currency exchange opposite the tourist office. Two more ATMs next door outside Iki.

**Tourist Office** (☎ 51 934; [www.trakai.lt](http://www.trakai.lt); Vytauto gatvė 69; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 12.45-4.15pm Mon, 8.30am-noon & 12.45-5.30pm Tue-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat Jun-Aug, 8am-noon & 12.45-5pm Mon-Thu, 8am-noon & 12.45-3pm Fri Sep-May) Sells maps and guides, books accommodation and proffers oodles of practical info.

### SIGHTS

The ruins of Trakai's **Peninsula Castle**, built from 1362 to 1382 by Kęstutis and destroyed in the 17th century, are at the north end of town. The peninsula itself is dotted with old wooden cottages, many built by the Karaites, a Judaic sect and Turkic minority originating in Baghdad, which adheres to the Law of Moses. Their descendants were brought to Trakai from the Crimea around 1400 to serve as bodyguards. Only 12 families (60 Karaites) live in Trakai and their numbers – 280 in Lithuania – are dwindling, prompting fears that the country's smallest ethnic minority is dying out. The **Karaites Ethnographic Museum** (Karaimų etnografinė paroda; ☎ 55 286; Karaimų gatvė 22; adult/student & child 2/1Lt, camera 4Lt, guided tour 20Lt; ☎ 10am-6pm Wed-Sun) traces their ancestry. Their beautifully restored early-19th-century **Kenessa** (Karaitė prayer house; Karaimų gatvė 30; admission by donation) can be visited.

The centrepiece of Trakai is its picture-postcard **Island Castle** on Lake Galvė. The painstakingly restored red-brick Gothic castle probably dates from around 1400, when Vytautas needed stronger defences than the peninsula castle afforded. A footbridge links it to the shore and a moat separates the triangular outer courtyard moat from the main tower with its cavernous central court and



a range of galleries, halls and rooms. Some house the **Trakai History Museum** (Trakų istorijos muziejus; ☎ 53 946; [www.trakaimuziejus.lt](http://www.trakaimuziejus.lt); adult/student & child 8/4Lt; ☎ 10am-7pm May-Sep, 10am-5pm Tue-Sun Oct-Apr), which charts the history of the castle. The castle's prominence as a holy site is reflected in its **collection of religious art** (☎ 53 941; Kestučio gatvė 4; adult/student & child 4/2Lt; ☎ 10am-6pm Wed-Sun). In summer the castle courtyard is a magical stage for concerts and plays.

### ACTIVITIES

Pick up a **pedalo** or **rowing boat** (both 7Lt an hour) from boatmen near the footbridge leading to the Island Castle.

The tourist office has information on the 14km **bicycle route** around the main sights. Kempingas Slėnyje (below) and the **Trakai National Sports & Health Centre** (Trakų Poilsio ir pramogų centras; ☎ 55 501; [www.sc.trakai.com](http://www.sc.trakai.com); Karaimų gatvė 73) rent bikes for 35Lt/6Lt per day/hour. Fishing, sailing, scuba diving and horse riding are also available at this former training camp for Lithuanian sporting heroes. It rents rowing boats (8Lt per hour), water bicycles (8Lt per hour), canoes (50Lt/10Lt per hour/day) and kayaks (35Lt/10Lt per hour/day); has a fabulous sauna (50Lt per hour) by the lake; and arranges hot-air ballooning (350Lt per hour). Winter guests enjoy horse-drawn sled rides, skiing and ice-fishing.

### SLEEPING

Accommodation options are limited.

**Kempingas Slėnyje** (☎ 53 380; [www.camptrakai.lt](http://www.camptrakai.lt); Slėnio gatvė 1; adult/car 16/6Lt plus 2-/4-person camp site 5/7Lt, lakeside hut for 2/4 people 80/100Lt, d/tr/q with shared bathroom 75/85/100Lt, cottage for 2-4 people 250Lt, d in guesthouse 120Lt; ☎) Some 5km out of Trakai in Slėnje, on the northern side of Lake Galvė off the road to Vievis, this camp site has accommodation to suit all budgets and comfort requirements. Basic lakeside huts are fine providing you have mosquito repellent. A sauna and steam bath (both 160Lt per two hours), sandy beach, folklore evenings and various sporting activities (above) ensure guests don't get bored. Campers can buy firewood (5Lt) and rent a floating BBQ with skewers for 20Lt (now how cool is that?).

**Lakštas Farm** (☎ 59 043, 8-698 16533; Varnikų Forest; d 120Lt; ☎) Ecotourists with their own wheels or hiking boots should head for this farm, some 5km east of Trakai in Varnikų Forest. Camp here, stay in a wooden cabin

### THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

**Akmeninė Užeiga** (Lake Stone Inn; ☎ 25 186, 8-698 30544; [www.akmenineuzeiga.lt](http://www.akmenineuzeiga.lt); standard/lux/superlux d 295/640/675Lt, cottage 795Lt; ☎) Find this traditional wood and thatched-roof hotel complex hidden on a lakeshore 2.5km north of Trakai. Nothing short of gorgeous, it comprises several luxury thatched cottages with fireplace and kitchen, and a main building where terraced rooms peep onto the water. Stylish dining (meals 50Lt) is beneath thatch or on a wooden jetty above the water – very romantic. Ladders lead into the water to swim, you can fish from a rowing boat and self-pamperers can watch DVDs in bed, sweat in a sauna or wallow in an outdoor Jacuzzi above the lake shore. Ice-fishing with hot rum tea is the thing to do in winter. To find Trakai's most magical and unique hide-out (there are no signs), follow the road north (signposted Vievis) out of central Trakai and almost immediately after passing Lakes Akmenos (left) and Galvės (right), turn left towards the thatched rooftops.

or in the main farmhouse. From Trakai, follow the Vilnius road to Lentvaris, then turn left (north) along Rubežiaus gatvė. The third road on the left leads to the farm.

### EATING

Akmeninė Užeiga (above) offers the best dining.

**Kibininė** (☎ 55 865; Karaimų gatvė 65; meals 20Lt) This green wooden house with Karaitė kitchen is *the spot* to munch on traditional Karaitė pasties called *kibinai* (like a Cornish pasty, served with a bread-based drink similar to *gira*). But beware that first bite – scalding-hot juices pour out. The pretty garden with lake view is particularly peaceful and a hole in the wall doles out meat- or veg-stuffed *kibinai* (3Lt to 3.60Lt) to take away.

**Kybynlar** (☎ 55 179; Karaimų gatvė 29; meals 20-40Lt; ☎) There is a definite Turkic feel to Trakai's other Karaitė-driven restaurant, where piping-hot pastries are likewise cooked up alongside a predominantly meat-based fare. The writing on the wall in Arabic is native Karaim, a language belonging to the Kipchak branch of Turkish languages and spoken as mother tongue by 535 people worldwide.

Buy picnics at **Iki** (☎ 54 628; Vytauto gatvė 56).



### THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

**Žejų Namai** (☎ 26 008; trout per kg 30Lt) For trout, fresher than fresh, motor 11km north of Trakai through pretty lake land to this one-of-a-kind restaurant. Kitted out with a couple of trout pools, a playground for kids and shaded bench seating around lakeside tables, this is the spot to lunch and have fun at the same time. Pick up a rod, bait and bucket and catch your own lunch. Staff are on hand to bash friskier fish over the head, after which the fish is weighed, filleted, cooked in a choice of spices and brought to your table on a platter. Other fishy delights include salted or smoked trout, herrings and bouillabaisse (fish soup). Žejų Namai is signposted 11km north of Trakai, off the road to Vievis.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

For buses and trains to/from Vilnius see p314. Seven daily trains leave **Trakai station** (☎ 51 055; Vilnius gatvė 5).

### Centre of Europe

Lithuania is proud of its supposed geographic **Europos centras** (centre of Europe), 25km north of Vilnius off the Molėtai highway. Despite contrary claims, the French National Geographical Institute pronounced this central position – at a latitude of 54° 54' and longitude of 25° 19' – in 1989, marking it with a boulder inscribed with the points of the compass and the words 'Geografinis Europos Centras'. When Lithuania joined the EU in 2004 it brightened up the bleak spot with 27 fluttering flags (the EU flag plus that of each member country), a wooden decking stage and a phallic white granite obelisk with a crown of gold stars. The surrounding rolling hills were landscaped and a wooden house marked 'tourist information' set up to issue 'I've been to the Centre of Europe' certificates for 5Lt a throw! Plans include a café and an 18-hole **golf course** (☎ 8-616 26 366; www.golfclub.lt) around Europe's disputed centre; nine holes might be complete by 2007.

Some 17km from the centre of Europe, off the Utena road, is **Europos parkas** (☎ 237 7077; www.europosparkas.lt; adult/student/child 18/12/6Lt, camera 6Lt; ☎ 9am-sunset). Leading contemporary sculptors, including Sol LeWitt and Dennis

Oppenheim, show works in wooded parkland (bring mosquito repellent in summer). The sculpture park was the brainchild of Lithuanian sculptor Gintaras Karosas in response to the centre of Europe tag. Every year international workshops are held here, attracting artists from all over the world. Its café serves light lunches. Say you're an artist and you might be able to kip here.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

To get to the centre of Europe, turn left off the Vilnius–Molėtai road at the sign saying 'Europos Centras'; park in the car park at the foot of the hill and walk. Follow the dirt road for another 600m to get to the golf club.

From Vilnius, minibuses marked 'Europos parkas' leave from the bus stop on Kalvarijų gatvė for the Centre of Europe Museum or take trolleybus 10 to the Žalgirio stop or bus 36 to the end of the line. By car, head north along Kalvarijų gatvė until you reach the Santasriskių roundabout, then bear right towards Žaliejų ežerai, following the signs for 'Europos parkas'.

### Kernavė

Deemed an 'exceptional testimony to 10 millennia of human settlements in this region' by Unesco who made it a world heritage site in 2004, Kernavė – the 'Pompeii of Lithuania' – is a must-see. Thought to have been the spot where Mindaugas (responsible for uniting Lithuania for the first time) celebrated his coronation in 1253, the rural cultural reserve comprises four old castle mounds and the remains of a medieval town.

The fascinating heritage of the **Kernavė Cultural Reserve** (Kernavės kultūrinio rezervato; www.kernave.org) can be explored in the **Archaeological & Historical Museum** (Archeologijos ir istorijos muziejus; ☎ 382-47 385; kernave.archeo@is.lt; Kerniaus gatvė 4a; adult/student & child 3/1Lt, guided tour 22Lt; ☎ 10am-5pm Wed-Sun Apr-Oct, to 3pm Wed-Sun Nov-Mar).

Medieval fun and frolics – axe throwing, catapulting, mead making, medieval fights, music making and so on – fill Kernavė with festivity on 23 June and during the three-day International Festival of Experimental Archaeology (lots of fun despite the deadly name) in mid-July.

To reach Kernavė, 35km northwest of Vilnius in the Neris Valley, follow the road through Dūkštos from Maisiagala on the main road north to Ukmergė.

## EASTERN & SOUTHERN LITHUANIA

The deep, magical forests of Lithuania's eastern and southern corners are a tree-hugger's paradise. Some of the most spectacular scenery in the Baltic region is found in these wildernesses, with a lake district that extends into Belarus and Latvia.

Aukštaitija National Park is Lithuania's oldest park, framed by the 900-sq-km Laboranas-Pabradė Forest. Exquisitely sweet and tiny wild strawberries are the pick of the abundant berry crop in early summer, while mushrooms of all shapes and

guises sprout by the bucketful from early spring until late autumn. Skiing, canoeing, hiking, windsurfing, watching golden eagles and spotting black storks (white ones are everywhere) are the tip of the iceberg as far as outdoor pursuits are concerned.

Dzūkija in the far south is the biggest national park, surrounded by the 1500-sq-km Druskininkai-Varėna Forest. Nearby, on the Nemunas River, is the increasingly hip spa resort of Druskininkai, where Čiurlionis compositions serenade fat-walleted self-pamperers who come here on weekend breaks for warm honey massages. Next door at Grutas sculpture park reside Lenin, Stalin and Co – the main reason most people travel here.



## Dangers & Annoyances

Mosquitoes are a menace so bring insect repellent. Only pick mushrooms with a local guide and be aware that the stomach of the guide – reared on mushrooms since birth – is substantially more tolerant of certain species than your own.

## Getting There & Around

The area is overwhelmingly rural and while travel to/from and around the region can be done by limited bus and train services to Druskininkai and other towns, nothing quite beats the freedom (buying mushrooms here) and flexibility (another extra night roughing it there) of your own wheels.

## AUKŠTAITIJA NATIONAL PARK

☎ 386

In beloved Aukštaitija National Park it's clear where Lithuania's love for nature arose. The natural paradise of deep, whispering forests and blue lakes bewitched this once-pagan country.

Around 70% of the park comprises pine, spruce and deciduous forests, inhabited by

elk, deer and wild boar. Its highlight is a labyrinth of 126 lakes, the deepest being **Lake Tauragnas** (60.5m deep). A footpath leads to the top of 155m **Ice Hill** (Ledakalnis), from where a panorama of some seven lakes unfolds. Particularly pretty is **Lake Baluošas**, ensnared by woods and speckled with islands. White-tailed and golden eagles prey here and storks are rife. The **Trainiškis Wildlife Sanctuary** and **Ažvinčiai Forest**, home to 150- to 200-year-old pine trees, can only be visited with park guides.

There are a hundred settlements within the park: **Šumainai**, **Salos II**, **Vaišnoriskės**, **Varniškes II** and **Strazdai** are protected ethnographic centres. **Ginučiai** has a 19th-century **water-mill** (☎ 8-616 29366; adult/student 3/1Lt; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sat, to 5pm Sun) with a small exhibition on its flour- and electricity-producing history. **Stripeikiai's Ancient Bee-keeping Museum** (Senorinės bitininkystės muziejus; adult/student 3/1Lt; ☎ 10am-7pm May-mid-Oct) spins the story of beekeeping through a merry collection of carved wooden statues and hives.

The park has several ancient *piliakalnis* (fortification mounds) such as the **Taurapilio mound** on the southern shore of Lake Tauragnas, and some quaint wooden architecture, including a fine **church** and **bell tower** at Palūšė. Around Lake Lūšiai a **wooden sculpture trail** depicts Lithuanian folklore.

Unaccompanied children under 16, littering, lighting fires and drunken behaviour are forbidden in the park.

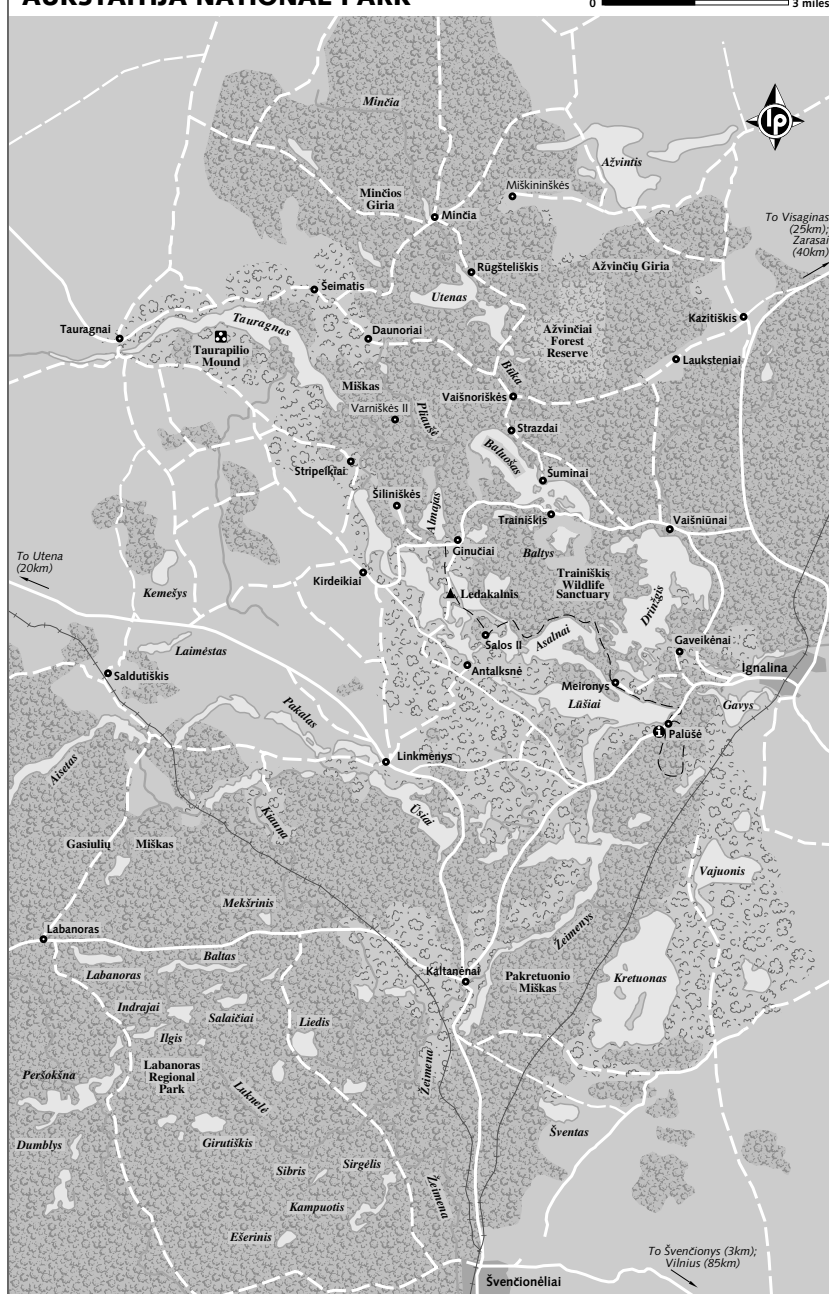
## Activities

Park maps (11Lt) and information are available from the **Aukštaitija National Park Office** (☎ 53 135, 47 478; anp@is.lt; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat), uphill from the main road opposite Lake Lūšiai (literally 'Wild Cat Lake'), southwest of Ignalina in **Palūšė**. The office arranges treks and backpacking trips by boat, arranges English-speaking guides (30Lt per hour) and organises skiing, fishing, horse riding and sledging.

Boatmen on the lakeshore in Palūšė rent rowing boats/canoes and kayaks for 5Lt/10Lt per hour. Arrange canoeing trips, with or without a guide, at the lakeshore **boat house** (☎ 36 079; www.valtine.lt; ☎ 8am-8pm May-Oct). The Tourism Centre Palūšė (p322) rents bicycles for 30Lt a day.

Mushroom and berry picking (p328) is only permitted in designated forest areas.

## AUKŠTAITIJA NATIONAL PARK



## THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

**Miškiniskės** (☎ 36 296, 8-612 33577; www.miskiniskes.lt; d with/without fireplace 170/150Lt, tr/q 150/200Lt, 5-/6-person cottages 390/440Lt; P) Vast grounds to wander, a deer enclosure with observation tower, a beach and a lake are icing on the cake at this fabulous hide-out, hidden in forest on the national park fringe. Created as an example of ecological living, accommodation comprises basic wooden cottages with fireplace and modern furnishings. Meals served in the main house are homemade and from the land: breakfasts (15Lt) of honey and mint tea, rhubarb cordial and pancakes; dinners (30Lt to 35Lt) of roast elk and boar with wild berries or fish (which you can catch yourself) fresh from the lake. Guests can rent a canoe/bicycle for 70Lt/35Lt a day, and in winter, ice skates and horse-drawn sledges are the way to get around. Find Miškiniskės signposted 2km northeast of Minčia on the road to Apkartai and Jakenai; at the signed turn-off, follow the potholed dirt track to its end (about 2.5km, despite the sign reading '1km').

## Sleeping

The national park office arranges homestay accommodation.

**Tourism Centre Palūšė** (☎ 52 891; www.paluse.lt; camp site for stays of less/more than 4 days 7/5Lt per day, wooden cabin 15Lt, d 60Lt, with shared bathroom 40Lt; (P)) The whole gamut of accommodation – camp sites to wooden cabins and comfy doubles with bathroom – is at this yellow wooden house opposite the national park office. Hire a tent/sleeping bag for 8Lt/6Lt per day.

**Lithuanian Winter Sports Centre** (Lietuvos žiemos sporto centras; ☎ 54 102, 54 193; www.ljssc.lt; Sporto gatvė 3, Ignalina; s/d/tr/apt 40/60/90/200Lt; (P)) Accommodation plays second fiddle at this Soviet-era sports centre where guests wake up, rent skis (5Lt/25Lt per hour/day) and leap on the ski lift (6Lt/30Lt per hour/day). Summer guests boat (5Lt per hour) on the lake or Rollerblade along a 7.5km track. From Ignalina centre, cross the train track and follow Budrių gatvė for 2km.

## Getting There & Away

Hop in the car or jump on a train from Vilnius to Ignalina (10Lt, two hours, seven daily), from where you have to walk or hitch.

There is one bus daily from Vilnius (via Molėtai, Panevėžys and Marijampolė), two buses to/from Kaunas (29.50Lt, four hours) and three to/from Utena.

## VISAGINAS & IGNALINA NUCLEAR POWER STATION

☎ 386 / pop 30,000

Doomed Visaginas is a town without a future: built in 1975 for workers of the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant, the unlucky lakeside frontier was designed by the USSR for energy specialists seconded from the Soviet Union to oversee the plant's construction. With its EU-forced closure (scheduled for 2009), people are now leaving in droves – before they are left in a ghost town with no job and little prospect of getting one nearby.

The Soviet toy town, packed with identical-looking blocks of flats amid a forest, is circled by a ring road, along which buses shuttle 3500 shift workers between Visaginas and the plant, 2km east of the town centre. In its heyday 5000 people worked at Ignalina. A Geiger counter records the day's radiation level and Russian remains the language spoken on the streets.

There's **tourist office** (☎ 52 597; www.ignalina.lt; Taikos gatvė 11; ☎ 8am–6pm Mon–Fri, 9am–2pm Sat, 10am–3pm Sun) here and staying the night is a must if you're after the ultimate Soviet experience. This is, after all, the only Soviet city in the EU where nothing is more than 30 years old! **Hotel Aukštaitija** (☎ 50 686; www.mimina.surgardas.lt; Veteranų gatvė 9; d 250Lt; (P)) is the concrete block for the full Soviet throwback, and 10-room, spa-clad **Gabriella** (☎ 70 171; www.gabriella.lt; Jaunystės gatvė 21; s/d from 180/240Lt; (P) 🚰) is the place to avoid it.

In mid-August Visaginas bizarrely rocks with a bunch of cowboys – hats, boots and all – who groove on into town from across Europe for the two-day international country music festival, **Visagino Country** (www.visagino-country.lt). The tourist office knows all about it.

## Getting There & Away

From Vilnius to Visaginas there are daily trains (12Lt, 1¾ to two hours, six daily) and the odd bus (12Lt, three hours).

## IGNALINA

Ignalina (named after Ignalina region) looks uncannily like Springfield's nuclear power station in *The Simpsons* and it's just as safe say scientists. Unlike reactors in the West, its one remaining online RMBK reactor – the same design as Ukraine's Chornobyl reactor, which exploded in 1986 – is graphite-cooled and has no containment system. If an accident occurs, there is an increased chance of emissions escaping into the atmosphere. Until 2004 the plant met 80% of Lithuania's energy needs.

Enormous pressure from the EU forced a reluctant Lithuania to shut down the first reactor on 31 December 2004 and pledge to shut the second by the end of 2009. Millions of euros have been pumped into Ignalina to improve safety, and its eventual closure and the disposal of redundant radioactive material – the complete decommissioning process will take 30 years – will consume €3.2 billion at least.

To visit the site, see a video in English about Ignalina and play with a scaled-down model of the plant, ring Ignalina AE's **Information Centre** (☎ 29 911; www.iae.lt; ☎ 8am–4pm Mon–Fri).

## LABANOROS REGIONAL PARK

West of Aukštaitija is 528 sq km of pretty parkland polka-dotted with 285 lakes. At its heart sits lovely **Labanoras**, home to the **Regional Park Information Centre** (☎ 838-731 357, 838-747 142; www.labanoroparkas.lt; ☎ 8am–noon & 1–5pm Mon–Fri, 8am–3pm Sat).

Canoeists can paddle until they drop with **Plaukių** (☎ 8-676 11086; www.plaukiu.com; Kalno gatvė 32) in Švenčionėliai. One-day canoe/kayak hire costs 40Lt/80Lt and those planning to stay overnight in the Labanoros or Aukštaitija parks can rent tent/sleeping bag/axe/kettle/skewers for 10Lt/10Lt/2Lt/5Lt/0.50Lt per day.

## Molėtai

☎ 383

A small town 30km west of the Aukštaitija National Park, Molėtai is unstartling bar its lake surrounds, on which its **tourist office** (☎ 51 187; www.infomolėtai.lt; Inturkės gatvė 4; ☎ 8am–6pm Mon–Fri, 9am–1pm Sat) has information.

There are spectacular views of Molėtai's lake-studded landscape and the stars above from the **Molėtai Astronomical Observatory** (Molėtų astronomijos observatorija; ☎ 45 444; www.astro.lt/mao) on Kaldiniai Hill (193m). The observatory boasts northern Europe's largest telescope. Next door, hell, heaven and earth can be explored at the **Lithuanian Ethnocosmology Museum** (Lietuvos etnokosmologijos muziejus; ☎ 45 424/3). Ring in advance for opening hours and to book an English-speaking guide.

To get here, follow the Molėtai–Utena road for 10km, then turn right at the 'Lietuvos etnokosmologijos muziejus' sign and follow the dirt track for 4km.

## THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

**Užeiga Prie Bravoro** (☎ 385-56 653; cizoalus@takas.lt; Dusetų homestead; ☎ 10am–10pm Tue–Sun) It's not much to look at, but the story behind this brewery creates its soul. Four generations have brewed the light, thirst-quenching Čizo alus (beer) since 1863, teenage daughters Miglė and Rūta being let into the family secret on their 16th birthdays. The girls are now frequently found behind the bar at their family-run village inn, pulling a pint of the cloudy unfiltered beer, cooking up winter-warming beer soup or showing punters the old beer-making equipment their grandfather used to grind hops. Preservatives are a strict 'No No' and honey made by forest bees is the only sweetener.

Their father, Ramūnas, gave up his day job to run his brewery full time in 1995: brewing and selling beer was forbidden in the USSR, forcing the fourth-generation brewer to concoct in secret while working as an economist. Today he produces 12 tonnes annually and tours craft fairs and folk celebrations (he's always in Kernavė on 6 July). Find his brewery on the northern fringe of Dusetos village.

## THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

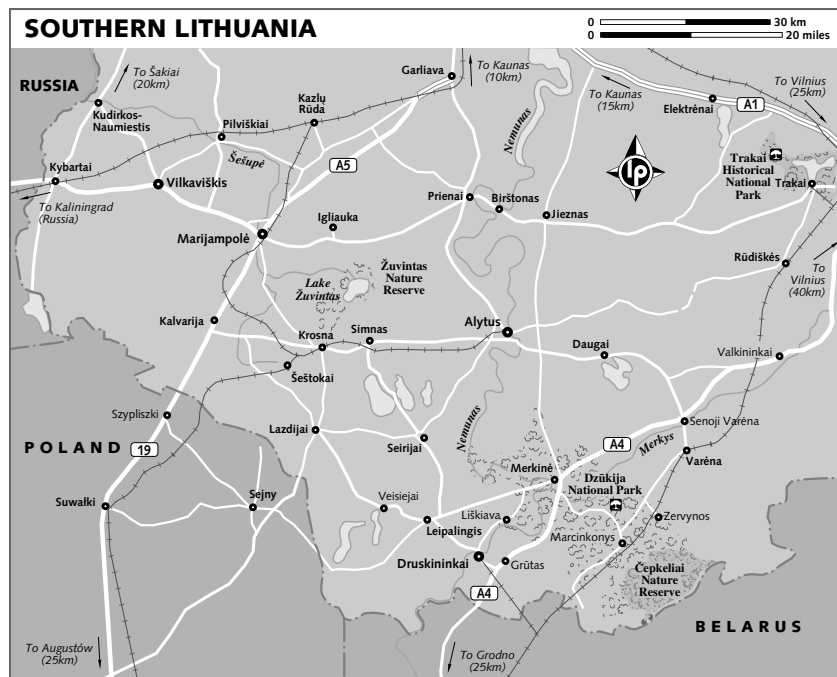
**Hotel Restaurant Labanoras** (☎ 8-655 70917; www.hotellabanoras.lt; meals 20–40Lt, d from 60Lt; (P)) This hotel-restaurant in Labanoras village, tucked in a pale peppermint-green house, is delightful. Its traditional wooden architecture and pretty terrace overlooking the village square make a bold contrast to the interior, crammed with collectables such as stuffed birds, padlocks and so on. The mushroom picker's stew, jam-packed with onions, lentils and locally picked and pickled green mushrooms, is delicious and the six rooms up top are divine. Guests can borrow a bike to explore the park.

## Utena

☎ 389 / pop 36,000

Utena, 34km north of Molėtai and a 101km drive from Vilnius, is famous for the Utenos beer it brews, and beer tourists should be able to visit the **Švyturys Utenos Alus brewery** (☎ 63 309; Pramonės gatvė 12). The **tourist office** (☎ 54 346; www.utenainfo.lt; Utenio aikštė 5; ☎ 9am–noon & 1–6pm Mon–Fri) can provide information.

**Alausynė** (☎ 75 724; www.abuva.lt; wooden chalet 50Lt, d 250Lt; (P)), 12km northeast in the tiny village of Salos immediately north of Sudeikiai village, cooks up fish soup – swimming with six different of fish (including eel and carp) and served in a brown loaf of bread. This regional speciality must be ordered 48 hours in advance. The farmstead offers comfortable accommodation, meals for 30Lt, a sauna and also rents out boats.



**Geltonasis Submarine** (☎ 50 223; www.submarinas.lt; Basanavičiaus gatvė 55; small/medium/large pizza 7/8/10Lt), a Beatles-inspired pizzeria that serves *pica su karka* (pizza with smoked pigs' trotters) is the cheeriest place to eat. **Iki** (Basanavičiaus gatvė 55; ☎ 8am-10pm) next door sells the makings of a lovely lakeside picnic.

From Utena **bus station** (☎ 61 740; Baranauskas gatvė 19) there are two daily buses to/from Ignalina (11Lt to 15Lt); up to eight daily to/from Vilnius (14.20Lt), a couple via Molėtai (10Lt to 12Lt) and eight daily to/from Kaunas (17.10Lt).

### Around Utena

Some 34km northeast of Utena is **Dusetos**, known for its annual horse race held the first Saturday in February on frozen **Lake Sartai**. The race dates to 1865 and attracts horse enthusiasts, musicians and folk artists from all over the region, who pour into the small village to watch the race and slug local Čizo beer (p323).

A fun spot to play is **Bikėnų Užeiga** (☎ 385-59 476; www.degesa.lt; ☎ 10am-10pm Apr-Sep), in Bikėnai on the eastern shore of **Lake Antalieptės**. The

bar rents rowing boats, canoes and kayaks for 6Lt per hour, charters a 10-person speedboat (250Lt per hour), and has a water slide that snakes into the water at a terrifying pace. The centre also organises two-day canoeing expeditions (80Lt for a two-person canoe and tent hire) on the Šventoji River and has rooms to rent in lakeside houses – and in a floating wooden house (400Lt for eight people).

### DRUSKININKAI

☎ 313 / pop 21,700

Nineteenth-century spa town Druskininkai on the Nemunas River is Lithuania's oldest and most chic. During the days of the USSR, the old and ailing flocked to this famous health resort in search of miracle cures for all sorts of ailments that its vast dinosaur sanatoriums treated. Today, as investments flood in, Druskininkai is shedding its fusty old grey-haired image. Chic weekend spa breaks for young, hip and wealthy Lithuanians seeking a quick detox from city life is what makes Druskininkai tick these days.

Salty mineral water aide, Druskininkai was the home of romantic painter and composer Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis (p281). Around the corner is the Baltics' only Soviet sculpture park.

### Information

**Internetas Visiems** (www.vija.lt; Čiurlionio gatvė 4a;

☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri) Internet.

**Post office** (Kudirkos gatvė)

**Tourist office** former train station building (☎ 60 800;

Gardino gatvė 3; ☎ 8.30am-12.15pm & 1-5.15pm

Mon-Fri); Town Centre (☎ 51 777; www.druskininkai.lt;

Čiurlionio gatvė 65; ☎ 10am-1pm & 1.45-6.45pm Mon-Sat, 10am-5pm Sun)

**Vilnius Bankas** (Čiurlionio gatvė 40; Vilniaus alėja 16)

Currency exchange inside, ATM outside.

### Sights

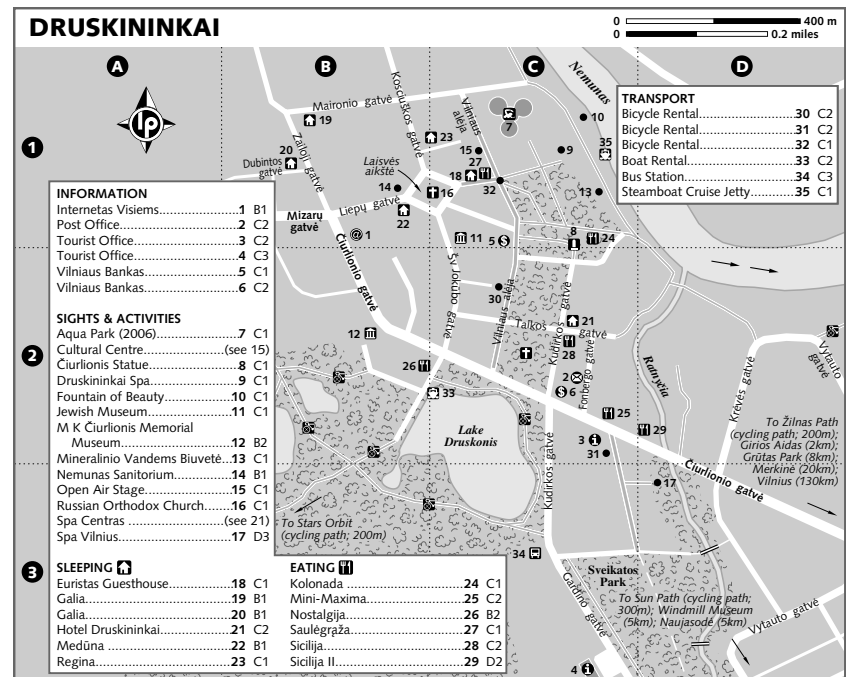
Lithuania's most talented painter-musician spent his childhood in what is now the **MK Čiurlionis Memorial Museum** (☎ 52 755; Čiurlionio gatvė 41; adult/student 3/1.50Lt; ☎ 11am-5pm Tue-Sun). A **statue** of Čiurlionis stands at the northern end of Kudirkos gatvė. Both the museum and the open-air stage in front of the

**Cultural Centre** (Vilniaus alėja 24) host beautiful classical concerts during the 'Druskininkai Summer with Čiurlionis' festival (June to September).

To see Druskininkai past and present, follow Čiurlionio gatvė to its northern end and turn right (east) along Liepu gatvė to Laisvės aikštė. On this vast tree-shaded square, one of the USSR's biggest and best, 10-storey **Nemunas Sanatorium** contrasts with the modern glass façade of Medūna (p327). The pretty, blue, multidomed **Russian Orthodox Church** in the square's middle dates to the 19th century.

Heading south, the **Jewish Museum** (☎ 53 100; Sv Jokibo gatvė 17; ☎ 11am-5pm Tue-Thu May-Oct) commemorates Druskininkai-born sculptor Jacques Lipchitz.

The magical powers of local mineral water can be tested at the Dzikija Fountain inside the **Mineralinio Vandens Biuvetė** (per cup 0.30Lt or per 10/20 days 5/9.50Lt; ☎ 11.30am-1.30pm & 4-7pm Mon-Fri, 10.30am-1.30pm Sat), a round green building with mosaic floor and stained-glass windows on the footpath running along the Nemunas. Continue north to the **Fountain of Beauty**



## STALIN WORLD

Headline-grabbing Grūtas Park opened amid controversy in 2001. Dubbed Stalin World, this collection of bronze sculptures once stared down Big Brother-style at oppressed Lithuanians in parks and squares countrywide. The former head of a collective farm, Viliūmas Malinauskas made his fortune canning mushrooms then won the loan of the hated objects from the Ministry of Culture in 1999 and transformed part of his 2-sq-km estate into a Soviet sculpture park.

Built to resemble a Siberian concentration camp, the park entrance is marked by a Soviet-Polish border crossing with barbed wire, red-and-white (Polish) and red-green (USSR) striped poles. Next to it is a single carriage in which Lithuanians were deported to Siberia. Once through the turnstile, Russian tunes blast from watchtowers, and in the restaurant, visitors eat vodka-doused sprats and onions with Soviet-made cutlery. Tacky souvenir stalls are rife; there is a playground with old Soviet swings and a mini children's zoo – all of which lends itself to critics branding the park a diabolical version of Disney.

Yet the park's attention to detail – reflected in the reconstructed rural Soviet polling station where visitors can sign the park's visitors' book – is impressive. In another building Soviet art is displayed and a stained-glass gallery is planned. Top of the bill are 13 Lenins, two Stalins, six Kapsukas and various other communist heroes.

Accused of trivialising Soviet horrors, Malinauskas, whose father spent 10 years in Siberian camps, said: 'This is a place reflecting the painful past of our nation which brought pain, torture and loss. One cannot forget or cross out history – whatever it is'.

Find **Grūtas Park** (Grūto parkas; ☎ 313-55 511; www.grutoparkas.lt; adult/5-16yr 10/3Lt, camera/video camera 5/10Lt; 🕒 9am-8pm) 8km east of Druskininkai; entering Grūtas village from the south, turn left (west) off the main road and follow the road 1km to its end.

(Grožio šaltinis) – one slurp of the shockingly salty water promises eternal beauty.

Heading 2km east of town, **Girios Aidas** (Echo of the Forest; ☎ 53 901; Čiurlionio gatvė 102; adult/child 4/2Lt, sculpture trail only 2Lt, camera 2Lt; 🕒 10am-6pm Wed-Sun) was built to give the impression of floating by using a wooden house supported by a single pedestal. Don't miss the wood carvings of elves and witches, some animated and hidden, in the nature museum here. A wooden sculpture trail runs through the surrounding forest.

More lovable folk characters fill the **Windmill Museum** (Vėjo malūnas; ☎ 52 448; adult/child 2/0.50Lt; 🕒 10am-6pm Wed-Sun), about 5km southeast of the centre in Naujasodė. Cycle or walk to it along the southbound Sun Path (p326).

## Activities

Spas (p327) aside, cruising around by pedal-power is hip. Bicycles and two- or four-seater buggies can be **rented** (☎ 52 318; 🕒 8am-9pm May-Oct) from the corner of Vilniaus and Laisvės alėjas, Vilniaus alėja 10 or next to the tourist office on Čiurlionio gatvė. Rates are 5Lt/8Lt for one/two hours or 30Lt per day for a bicycle and 15Lt per hour for a buggy.

The tourist office sells cycling maps (0.50Lt) covering three cycling trails: the southbound riverside **Sun Path** (Saulės takas; 24km) – also a footpath – goes to the windmill museum (p326), **Stars Orbit** (Žvaigždžių orbita; 20km) snakes south into the Raigardas Valley, and the forested eastbound **Žilnas Path** (Žilvino takas; 20km) links Druskininkai with Grūtas Park (p326) 8km east – a great day trip.

Very restful is a row in a **rowing boat** or pedal in a **pedalo** (12Lt per hour) on Lake Druskonis, or a **steamboat cruise** (☎ 53 393; ticket 24Lt) along the Nemunas River to Liškiava in the Dzūkija National Park (p328), departing May to October at 2.30pm Tuesday to Sunday. Journey time takes 45 minutes each way and passengers spend 1½ hours in Liškiava before sailing back to Druskininkai.

## Sleeping

Prices increase on weekends and in July and August when this spa town buzzes – with laid-back punters out for a drop-dead lazy time.

**Hotel Druskininkai** (☎ 52 566; www.hotel-druskininkai.lt; Kudirkos gatvė 43; s/d/ste from 150/200/350Lt; 📞 ☒ ☑ 📺 📺) Hotel Druskininkai with its

striking glass-and-wood façade is living proof that Soviet blocks can be transformed beyond recognition. Luxury suites have terrace and steam booth and everyone can use the Turkish bath, the Jacuzzi bubbling with Druskininkai mineral water, and the hotel gym.

**Regina** (☎ 59 060; www.regina.lt; Kosciuskos gatvė 3; s/d/ste from 129/179/400Lt; 📞 ☒ ☑) Regina strives to be an anywhere-in-the-world hotel, but trips up on the detail: no lift, amusing mistakes in the English menu and tiny, wafer-thin paper napkins in the restaurant (meals 40Lt to 80Lt).

**Galia** (☎ 60 510; www.galia.lt; Maironio gatvė 3, Dubintos gatvė 3 & 4; d from 250Lt; 📞) Galia surprises with a rainbow of colours. The hotel has several buildings, so confirm which is yours before checking in; the Maironio one is a candyfloss-pink affair with dark furnishings and Soviet stained glass.

**Euristas Guesthouse** (☎ 52 318, 8-618 00441; euristas@one.lt; Laisvės alėja 1 22; d 80-100Lt; 📞) Scandinavian-style rooms lounge in a green-stained wooden house behind the souvenir stalls off the main pedestrian avenue. If no-one is at home, check in at the pizzeria next door.

**Medūna** (☎ 58 033; www.meduna.lt; Liepy gatvė 2; s/d/ste from 69/89/200; 📞) No English appears to be spoken at the Meduna, a bold exam-

ple of contemporary architecture. Interior furnishings are less inspiring.

## Eating

The dining scene is limited, rendering unremarkable hotel restaurants like Regina a serious option.

**Kolonada** (☎ 51 222, 8-612 11088; www.kolonada.lt; Kudirkos gatvė 22; meals 30-50Lt) This renovated late-1920s music hall propped up by classical columns oozes atmosphere. Have a terrace lunch with river view or sip apéritifs at dusk against a backdrop of local jazz (Friday), blues and rock 'n' roll (Saturday) or classical music (Sunday). A fireplace hangs inside.

**Saulėgraža** (☎ 52 254; Vilniaus alėja 22; meals 20-30Lt) Saulėgraža stands out as a happening bar with reliable Lithuanian- and American-style pizzas, a pool hall and a decking terrace with a view to slurp beer on.

**Nostalgija** (Čiurlionio gatvė 55; meals 30Lt) A shady terrace staring out across Lake Druskonis is the drawcard of Nostalgija, which has a beer hall like a boat and a minimalist café.

**Sicilija** (☎ 51 865; Taikos gatvė 9; meals 30Lt) Pizza – 60 varieties – is the speciality of this dining spot, which runs a second, industrial-styled outlet, **Sicilija II** (☎ 57 258; Čiurlionio gatvė 56).

Self-caterers can stock up at **Mini-Maxima** (Čiurlionio gatvė 50).

## TOP DRUSKININKAI SPAS

Druskininkai is spa-riddled. But beware. Not all are swish. Step into the wrong place and you could be slapped around by a formidable babushka straight out of a horror movie.

Hot-choice **Spa Centras** (☎ 60 523; Kudirkos gatvė 43), inside Hotel Druskininkai, has separate bubbling pools, inviting serious wallowers to pick from Dead Sea water (36Lt per 20 minutes), local mineral water or good old tap water (25Lt per hr). On the massage front (65Lt per hr), the body pummel with warm honey – a stronger massage than with regular or aromatic oil – wins hands down, although the massage with silky-smooth hot Hawaii stones is heavenly.

Equally striking designwise is **Spa Vilnius** (☎ 53 811; www.spa-vilnius.com; Dineikos gatvė 1). This spa, with a retro 1950s-style café-bar inside an eight-storey hotel, sports the best indoor swimming pool (filled with local mineral water) and a clutch of baths, including one with seaweed (30Lt) and another with mud (10Lt). It also offers the full range of massages, including underwater body (25Lt per 30 minutes) and Shiatsu foot (40Lt per 30 minutes) ones. Scary-sounding things like intestine showers and gynaecologic irrigations are other mineral-water treatments on offer.

Then there's **Druskininkai Spa** (Druskininkų gydykla; ☎ 60 508; www.gydykla.lt; Vilniaus alėja 11), a peppermint-green, riverside building propped up by marble columns. Pearl, herbal, mineral, mud and even vertical baths are among its wonderful watery delights. It likewise treats a mind-boggling array of diseases – cardiovascular, cutaneous, vestibular, endocrinal etc.

Next door, a €12 tourist **aqua park** (Vendens parkas) promises to be Druskininkai's biggest attraction, opening in late 2006. It's set in a magnificent Soviet complex comprising three crab-shaped buildings joined together in a clover-leaf formation.

## Getting There & Away

From the **bus station** (☎ 51 333; Gardino gatvė 1), there are up to 10 daily buses (19Lt, two hours) to/from Vilnius; seven buses daily to/from Kaunas (19Lt, two to three hours), one of which continues to/from Palanga (46.50Lt), one to/from Panevėžys (33Lt) and one to/from Šiauliai (39Lt).

## DŽŪKIJA NATIONAL PARK

☎ 310

This lush mushroom-picking and berrying spot (see p328) is the perfect place to evict a few gnomes from their mushroom homes. Covering 550 sq km, the park is Lithuania's largest with four-fifths covered by dense pine forest. Between Marcinkonys and the Belarusian border, the **Čepkeliai Strict Nature Reserve** safeguards the country's largest marsh. The Ūla and Grūda Rivers cross the park and 48 lakes polka-dot it.

Several villages, including **Zervynos**, between Varėna and Marcinkonys, are ethnographic reserves. **Liškiava**, 10km northeast of Druskininkai, has remnants of a 14th-century hill-top **castle**. The village **church** and former Dominican monastery is famous for its seven rococo-style altars and its crypt with glass coffins. **Merkinė**, 10km further down the Nemunas, is the starting point for a 12km **black potters' trail** around workshops where pots as black as soot are made from red clay. The extraordinary colour comes from pine-wood resin fired with the pot in an outdoor

kiln. Other traditions like woodcarving, weaving, basket-making and beekeeping come to life in Marcinkonys' **Ethnographic Museum** (Marcinkonių etnografinis muziejus; ☎ 8-616 52623; Miškininkų gatvė 7; adult/child 2/1Lt; ☎ 9am-4pm Tue-Sat May-Sep, 10am-4pm Tue-Sat Oct-Apr).

Visitor centres in **Marcinkonys** (☎ 44 466; info@dzukijosparkas.lt; Miškininkų gatvė 61; ☎ 8am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-6pm Sat) and **Merkinė** (☎ 57 245; merkine@dzukijosparkas.lt; Vilniaus gatvė 3; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Thu, 8am-3.45pm Fri) advise on walking, cycling and canoeing along the Ūla, and an arranging English-speaking guides (30/100Lt per hour/day) to take you mushrooming or berrying. The centres also have information on the 14km **Zackagiris Walking Trail**, with shorter 7km and 10.5km routes, which starts outside Marcinkonys visitor centre.

Falling just outside the boundaries of the park, 22km northeast of Marcinkonys and 58km northeast of Druskininkai, is **Varėna** (www.varena.lt). Founded in the 15th century when Grand Duke Vytautas built a hunting lodge here, it is the birthplace of Čiurlionis. The main road (A4) leading from Varėna to Druskininkai is lined with sculpted wooden 'totem' poles and sculptures, erected in 1975 in commemoration of the 100th anniversary of his birth.

## Sleeping

The visitor centre arranges homestay accommodation (35Lt to 100Lt per person); camping is only allowed in designated areas.

## MUSHROOMING & BERRYING

Mushrooming is a blooming business, particularly in the Aukštaitija and Džūkija National Parks, which, come August and September, are carpeted with little white and yellow buttons. The forests lining the Varėna-Druskininkai highway (A4) and the Zervynos forests – best known for sand dunes, beehive hollows and substantial *grybas* (mushroom) populations – make rich *grybaula* (mushroom-hunting grounds) too. For mushroom addicts, there's Varėna's September mushroom festival.

The crinkle-topped, yellow chanterelle and stubby *boletus* are among the edible wild mushroom varieties hunted and exported to other parts of Europe. The less common *baravykas*, with its distinctive brown cap, is a stronger-tasting mushroom that ends up stuffed inside a *cepelinai* (zeppelin-shaped parcels of thick potato dough stuffed with cheese, meat or mushrooms) or dried and stored until Christmas Eve, when it is served as one of the 12 dishes (p285). Lithuania boasts 1200 mushroom species; 100 are poisonous and 380 edible.

Berrying is another trade and tradition. Red bilberries can only be picked in August and cranberries in September, but most other berries – wild strawberries, blueberries, buckthorn berries, sloe berries and raspberries – can be harvested whenever they are ripe.

The roadside rate for mushrooms is around 15Lt per kilogram. Look for locals selling at road-sides, glass jam jars overflowing with freshly picked forest goodies lined up on car bonnets. The mushroom season runs early spring to late autumn.

**Zervynos Hostel** (☎ 8-687 50826; dm 10Lt) Affiliated to the Lithuanian Hostels Association, this rural idyll has two wooden turn-of-the-20th-century cottages, one with wood-burning stove, the other with no heating. Both have basic bunks and no running water (bathe in the river and pee in the bushes). Meals cost 5Lt to 7Lt. There is a sauna (17Lt an evening) and it organises mushrooming, berrying and canoeing expeditions on the Ūla River. Call in advance (little English is spoken) and someone will meet you at Zervynos train station. By car, Zervynos Hostel is at the end of a 3km gravel road, signposted off the main Varėna-Marcinkonys road (take the right fork at the end).

## Getting There & Away

In summer a **steamboat** (☎ 53 393; ticket 24Lt) makes half-day trips from Druskininkai to Liskiava.

The four buses to/from Druskininkai and Vilnius stop at the Merkinė intersection (Merkinės kryžkelė), 2km east of Merkinė town centre.

Six daily trains to/from Vilnius stop at Zervynos (10Lt, two hours).

## THE SOUTHWEST

Southwestern Lithuania is a rural pocket few venture into bar Poland-bound travellers who drive through **Lazdijai**, 43km northwest of Druskininkai, or rattle by train through **Šeštokai**, 18km north of Lazdijai, en route to Suwałki (Poland).

The main approach to the Kalvarija-Suwałki road border crossing with Poland is through **Marijampolė** (population 69,900), the largest southwestern town, with an attractive 1920s train-station building, a neo-baroque twin-towered basilica (1824) and a small Old Town. Six bridges cross the Šešupė River, dividing old town from new, and an **Ethnographic Museum** (☎ 343-93 042; Vytauto gatvė 31; adult/child 2/1Lt; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) reflects daily southwestern life a couple of centuries ago. The **tourist office** (☎ 343-51 109; jotva@mari.omnitel.net; Kudirkos gatvė 41) and municipality website (www.marijampole.lt) are handy info sources.

Pretty **Alytus**, in a 16km loop of the Nemunas River 72km southeast, is the capital of the southern ethnographic Džūkija region. Cycling paths are plentiful and the town is a springboard for forays into the **Žuvinas Na-**

**ture Reserve**, an important breeding ground for birds. Alytus **tourist office** (☎ 315-52 010; www.alytus.lt; Rotušės aikštė 14a) has information on bird-watching, boats and bicycles.

## Sleeping & Eating

Both towns have a handful of places to stay and eat. Standouts:

**Hotel Sudavija** (☎ 343-52 995; www.sudavija.com; Sodo gatvė 1a, Marijampolė; s/d/ste 150/180/200Lt; ☎ ) This atmospheric, cream-and-white mansion set amid parkland off Vytauto gatvė boasts three stars and a restaurant that makes tummies rumble.

**Keta** (☎ 315-52 264; Gedimino gatvė 1a, Alytus; meals 20Lt; ☎ 10am-midnight) There is no mistaking you're in provincial Lithuania at this rustic restaurant where traditional cuisine is served in a folkloric setting. Note the old weaving loom.

## Getting There & Away

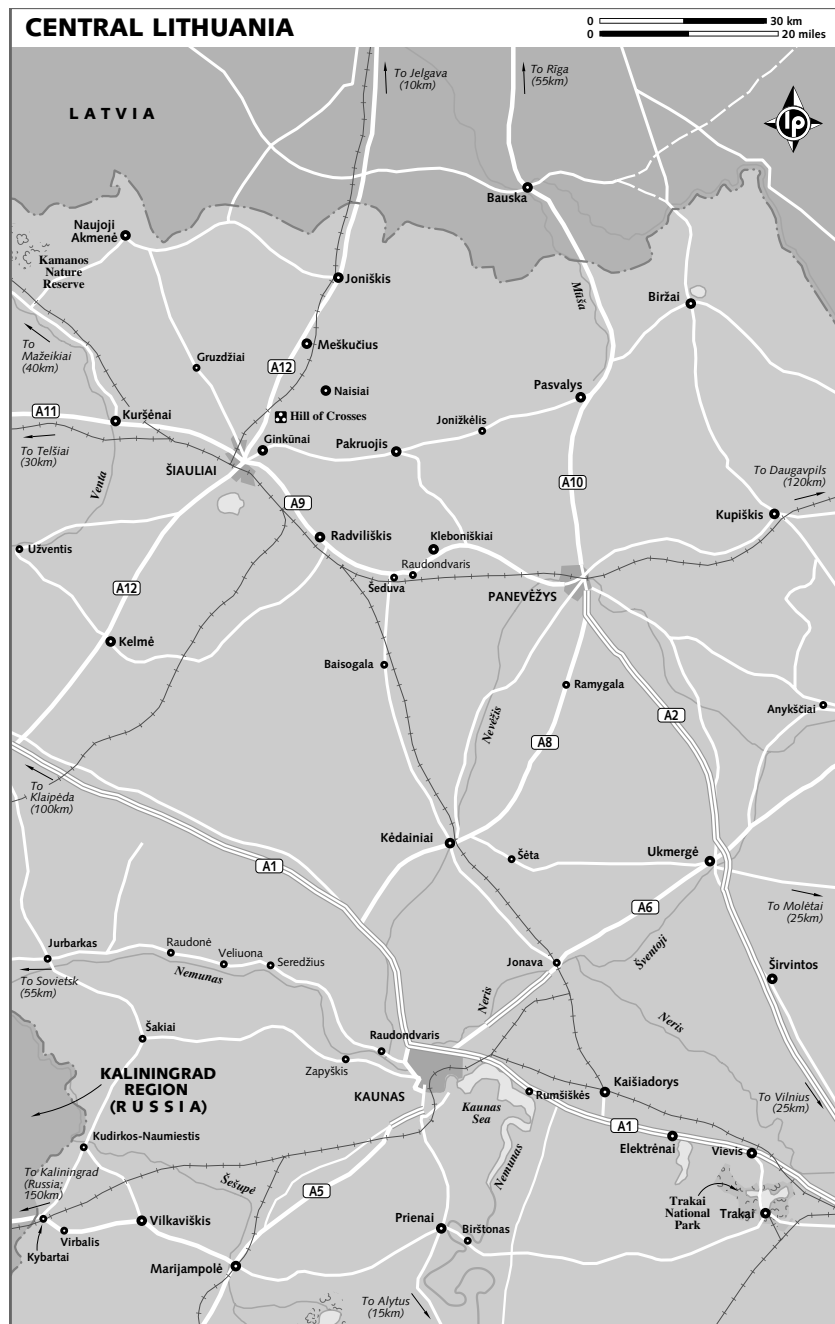
Buses run to Marijampolė from Kaunas, and to Lazdijai from Druskininkai, Kaunas and Vilnius. Four trains run to Šeštokai from Kaunas via Marijampolė, one from Vilnius (on even days). For details on getting to/from Poland, see p396.

# CENTRAL LITHUANIA

Central Lithuania is a strange brew. More of an accidental stopover point en route to somewhere else rather than a destination in itself, this large flat area is invariably written off as dull and short on vision. Yet it proffers a couple of Lithuania's most bizarre and blackest sights.

Three cities form a neat triangle. Coplacent Kaunas, primary kick-off point for central-country forays, still rides on its sterling reputation as alternative Lithuanian capital during the interwar period when Vilnius was part of Poland. And indeed, it's got a great palace to prove it presidential past. But, say critics, Kaunas must brush up and progress if it wants to stay in today's EU-driven game. The exciting arrival of no-frills budget airline Ryanair to Kaunas in September 2005, not to mention the hoards of Brits it brings on the cheap, could be the catalyst.

Then there's Šiauliai, a closed city in Soviet times that sheltered the USSR's largest military base outside Russia, and today the



place from which Baltic skies are policed by NATO air forces. Learning how enterprising locals made a living from syphoned-off fuel intended for Soviet MiG-29 fighters is enlightening. The same incredible spirit of resilience pervades the obligatory pilgrimage tourists make 12km north to Lithuania's strangest monument, the papal-blessed Hill of Crosses.

Throw into the melting pot 'Chicago of Lithuania' Panevėžys, the black fort where Nazis murdered the region's Jewish population, a cruder of a nature park, top-brand beers and the Baltic's biggest jazz festival – and that stop in the centre of the country might just become far from accidental.

### Getting There & Away

The region is well linked by public transport to Vilnius, Klaipėda and other major towns (see p338), and Panevėžys is a major stop on the bus route to/from Riga. By the time you read this, a hydrofoil will sail along the Nemunas River from Kaunas to/from Rusnė and Nida in Western Lithuania.

### KAUNAS

☎ 37 / pop 415,800

Kaunas has a reputation as a sprawling urban city and a hotbed of post-Soviet mafia. Think again. This vibrant city, the second largest in Lithuania, is a thriving cultural and industrial centre with an interesting Old Town.

Legend has it that Kaunas, 100km west of Vilnius at the confluence of the Nemunas and Neris Rivers, was founded by the son of tragic young lovers. Beautiful maiden Milda let the Holy Eternal Flame go out while caring for her lover Daugerutis. They were sentenced to death by vengeful gods, thus they fled to a cave and gave birth to Kaunas.

Archaeologists insist the city dates from the 13th century and until the 15th century was in the front line against the Teutonic Order in Lithuania's west. Kaunas became a successful river-trading town in the 15th and 16th centuries. German merchants were influential here, and there was a Hanseatic League office. Its strategic position is the main reason it was destroyed 13 times before WWII – when it once again received a battering.

Today it is a town with a sizable student population, some fine architecture, plenty of museums and terrible food.

### Orientation

Rotušės aikštė, the square wedged between the Nemunas and Neris Rivers, is the historic heart. From here pedestrian Vilniaus gatvė runs east to meet the city's main axis, Laisvės alėja – also pedestrian. The bus and train stations are 900m and 1.25km respectively south of the eastern end of Laisvės alėja.

### MAPS

Jāņa sēta publishes the *Kaunas City Plan* (1:25,000), sold in bookshops and supermarkets.

### Information

#### BOOKSHOPS

**Centrinis Knygynas** (☎ 229 572; Laisvės alėja 81)

Maps, English-language newspapers and magazines.

**Humanitas** (☎ 209 581; Vilniaus gatvė 11) English-language books.

#### INTERNET ACCESS

**Kavinė Internetas** (☎ 407 427; www.cafė.net.lt; Vilniaus gatvė 26; per hr 4L; ☎ 8.15am-midnight) Old Town Internet café.

#### INTERNET RESOURCES

**Kaunas** (www.kaunas.lt) Official city website.

#### MEDICAL SERVICES

**Gintarinė vaistinė** (Vilniaus gatvė 35; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat, 10am-5pm Sun) Pharmacy.

#### MEDIA

**Kaunas In Your Pocket** Annual city guide sold in hotels, art galleries and news kiosks for 5Lt; download it in PDF format at [www.inyourpocket.com](http://www.inyourpocket.com).

#### MONEY

For currency exchange inside; ATM accepting Visa and MasterCard outside:

**Hansa Bankas** (Vilniaus gatvė 13; Laisvės alėja 79)

**Snoras Bankas** (Laisvės alėja 60)

**Vilniaus Bankas** (Vilniaus gatvės 43)

#### POST

**Post office** (Laisvės alėja 102)

#### TOURIST INFORMATION

**Tourist office** (☎ 323 436; <http://visit.kaunas.lt>;

Laisvės alėja 36; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm &

2-6pm Sat & Sun Jun-Sep, 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Sat Oct-May) Books accommodation, sells maps and guides; arranges bicycle rental.



INFORMATION		Medicine & Pharmaceutical	EATING
Centrinis Knygynas.....	1 C2	History Museum.....	25 A2
Gintarinė vaistinė.....	2 B2	Military Museum of Vytautas the Great.....	26 D1
Hansa Banks.....	3 D2	Museum of Deportation & Resistance.....	27 F3
Hansa Banks.....	4 B2	Museum of Devils.....	28 D1
Kavinė Internetas.....	5 B2	Mykolas Žilinskas Art Gallery.....	29 E2
Post Office.....	7 C2	National Ciurlionis Art Museum.....	30 D1
Snoras Banks.....	8 D2	Palace of Weddings.....	31 A2
Tourist Office.....	9 E2	St Francis Church.....	32 A2
Vilniaus Banks.....	10 B2	St George's Church.....	33 A2
		St Gertrude's Church.....	34 C2
		St Michael the Archangel's Church.....	35 E2
		St Peter & St Paul's Cathedral.....	36 A2
		Statue of Maironis.....	37 A2
		Statue of Vytautas the Great.....	38 C2
		Sughara House.....	39 F3
		Tadas Ivanauskas Zoological Museum.....	40 C2
		Vytautas Church.....	41 A3
		Vytautas Magnus University.....	42 D2
		Lithuania.....	18 B2
		Holy Trinity Church.....	(see 47)
		Apple Hotel.....	43 A2
		Best Western Santakos.....	44 C2
		Daniela.....	45 E2
		Kaunas Hotel.....	46 D2
		Kauno Arkivyskupijos Svečių Namai.....	47 A2
		Kunigaikščių menė.....	48 B2
		Litinterp.....	49 E2
		Metropolis.....	50 D2
		Takioji Neris.....	51 E1
		Avilys.....	(see 58)
		Bernelių Užėja.....	52 E1
		Bernelių Užėja.....	53 A2
		Iki.....	54 B1
		Miesto Sodas.....	55 C2
		Minima.....	56 D2
		Presto.....	57 C2
		Senieji Rūsiai.....	58 B2
		BO.....	59 A2
		Bumerangas.....	60 A2
		Crazy House Užėja.....	61 A2
		Kavos Klubas.....	62 A2
		City Metro.....	63 D2
		Ex-It.....	64 A2
		Kaunas Academic Drama Theatre.....	65 D2
		Kaunas Musical Theatre.....	66 C2
		Kaunas Philharmonic.....	67 C2
		Kaunas Puppet Theatre.....	68 D2
		Planeta.....	69 F4
		Romuva.....	70 D2
		Siena.....	(see 55)
		Youth Chamber Theatre.....	71 C2
		Air Lithuania.....	72 D2
		Ecolines.....	(see 74)
		Eurolines.....	(see 74)
		Local Bus Station.....	73 A2
		Long-Distance Bus Station.....	74 F3

## Sights

### OLD TOWN

Vilniaus gatvė is the main artery of charming Old Town. Its eastern end is dominated by the former **Presidential Palace of Lithuania** (Lietuvos Respublikos prezidentūra kaune; Vilniaus gatvė 33; adult/student 3/1.50Lt; ☎ 11am-5pm Wed-Sun, gardens 8am-9pm Tue-Sun), where the country was run between 1920 and 1939. Restored to its original grandeur, the palace hosts a great exhibition on independent Lithuania. Black and white photographs are interspersed with gifts given to past presidents, collections of family silver and presidential awards. Statues of the former presidents stud the palace garden.

Nearby, the **Folk Music & Instruments Museum** (Lietuvos tautinės muzikos muziejus; ☎ 422 295; Kurpių gatvė 12; adult/child 2/1Lt; ☎ 10am-6pm Wed-Sun Oct-May, 11am-6pm Wed-Sun Jun-Sep) strikes a musical note.

**St Peter & St Paul's Cathedral** (Vilniaus gatvė 1) with its single tower owes much to baroque reconstruction, especially inside, but the original 15th-century Gothic shape of its windows remains. It was probably founded by Vytautas around 1410 and now has nine

altars. The **tomb** of Maironis stands outside the south wall.

### Rotušės Aikštė

Soviet planners threatened to bulldoze a highway through this **central square** (they didn't) and its pretty 15th- and 16th-century German merchants' houses and 17th-century former town hall remain. The latter, now a **Palace of Weddings** where brides and grooms say *taip* ('I do') on Saturday, has a small **Ceramics Museum** (Keramikos muziejus; ☎ 203 572; Rotušės aikštė 15; adult/child 3/1.50Lt; ☎ 11am-5pm Tue-Sun) in its cellar. In the square's south-western corner is a **statue of Maironis** (1862-1932), a Kaunas priest called Jonas Mačiulis who was the poet behind Lithuania's late-19th- and early-20th-century nationalist revival. Stalin banned his works. From 1910 to 1932 Maironis lived in the house behind, now the **Maironis Lithuanian Literary Museum** (Maironio Lietuvos literatūros muziejus; ☎ 200 410; Rotušės aikštė 13; adult/child 3/1Lt; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sat). The square's southern side is dominated by the twin-towered **St Francis Church** (Rotušės aikštė 7-9), college and Jesuit monastery



complex, built between 1666 and 1720; and the late-Renaissance (1624–34), terracotta-roofed **Holy Trinity Church** (Rotušės aikštė 22) fills the western side.

The **Medicine & Pharmaceutical History Museum** (Medicinos ir farmacijos istorijos muziejus; ☎ 201 569; Rotušės aikštė 28; adult/child 3/1Lt; ☎ 11am–6pm Wed–Sun Apr–Oct, 11am–5pm Wed–Sun Nov–May) is gruesome and fascinating. The former post office contains the **Communications Development Museum** (Ryšii istorijos muziejus; ☎ 424 920; Rotušės aikštė 19; adult/child 2/1Lt; ☎ 10am–6pm Wed, Thu, Sat & Sun) should old telephones be your thing.

Off the southeast of Rotušės aikštė, the curious **House of Perkūnas** (Perkūno namas; Aleksotas gatvė 6) was built in red brick in the 16th century as trade offices on the site of a former temple to the Lithuanian thunder god, Perkūnas. Beyond, on the bank of the Nemunas River, the Gothic-style **Vytautas Church** (Vytauto bažnyčia; Aleksoto gatvė 5) is the same red brick.

### Kaunas Castle

A reconstructed tower, sections of wall, and part of a moat are all that remain of Kaunas Castle, around which the town originally grew. Founded in the 13th century, it was an important bastion of Lithuania's western borders.

Trolleybus 7 from the bus or train stations terminates at the castle site.

### Lookout Points

Apparently there are nine lookout points of Kaunas. Don't bother finding all of them! The hill across the Nemunas from Vytautas Church offers a good view of old and new Kaunas. Cross the bridge and mount the hill via either the **Aleksoto funicular** (Aleksoto funikulierius; Skriaudžių gatvė 8 & Aušros gatvė 6; ticket 0.60Lt; ☎ 7am–noon & 1–4pm Mon–Fri) – one of Europe's few surviving funiculars – or the steps beside it. A right turn from the top funicular station leads to the lookout point.

The **Green Hill funicular** (Žaliakalnio funikulierius; Putvinskio gatvė 22; ticket 0.50Lt; ☎ 7am–7pm) glides up **Green Hill** (Žaliakalnis). Above the top station towers **Christ's Resurrection Basilica** (Kauno paminklinė Kristaus Prisikėlimo bažnyčia; ☎ 200 883; Zemaičių gatvė 316; ☎ 10am–7pm), a piece of history that took 70 years to build. A Nazi paper warehouse and a Soviet radio factory, the church was finally consecrated in 2004.

### NEW TOWN

Kaunas expanded east from Old Town in the 19th century, giving birth to the modern centre and its striking 1.7km pedestrian street, **Laisvės alėja**. Also known as Freedom

Avenue, it was legendary for years as one of the few strips where smoking was banned – until 2000 when the city mayor butted in and permitted puffing again.

Independent Lithuania's first parliament convened in 1920 at the **Kaunas Musical Theatre**, the former State Theatre Palace overlooking **City Garden** (Miestos Sodas) at the western end of Laisvės alėja since 1892. **Field of Sacrifice** (2002) – a name engraved on paving slabs in front of the garden – is a tragic tribute to the young Kaunas hero (p335) who set himself alight in protest at Soviet rule. Across the street, a **statue of Vytautas the Great** and a stone turtle stand outside the **Tadas Ivanauskas Zoological Museum** (Tado Ivanausko zoologijos muziejus; ☎ 229 675; Laisvės alėja 106; adult/child 5/3Lt; ☎ 11am–7pm Tue–Sun). Inside, 13,000 stuffed animals jockey for attention.

A gothic gem of a church is tucked in a courtyard off Laisvės alėja: **St Gertrude Church** (Šv Gertrūdos bažnyčia; Laisvės alėja 101a) was built in the late 15th century. Its red-brick crypt overflows with burning candles, prompting a separate candle shrine to be set up in a shed opposite the crypt entrance.

The Soviets turned the blue neo-Byzantine **St Michael the Archangel Church** (Šv Mykolo Arkangelo igulos bažnyčioje; Nepriklausomybės aikštė 14), filling the skyline at the eastern end of Laisvės alėja, into a stained-glass museum. Built for the Russian Orthodox faith in 1895, the church was reopened to Catholic worshippers in 1991.

On the same square, **Man**, modelled on Nike the Greek god of victory, caused a storm of controversy when his glorious pose exposing his manhood was unveiled. The **Mykolas Žilinskas Art Gallery** (Mykolo Žilinsko dailės galerija; ☎ 222 853; Nepriklausomybės aikštė 12; adult/child 5/2.50Lt; ☎ 11am–5pm Tue–Sun) behind boasts Lithuania's only Rubens.

Close to Laisvės alėja, a memorial at Kaunas' only operational **Choral Synagogue** (Choralinė sinagoga; ☎ 206 880, 8-614 03100; Ožėškienės gatvė 17; admission free; ☎ 5.45–6.30pm Mon–Fri, 10am–noon Sat) remembers 1600 children killed at the Ninth Fort (p335). The WWII Jewish ghetto was on the western bank of the Neris, in the area bounded by Jurbarko, Panerių and Demokratų streets.

### Vienybės Aikštė

Unity Sq houses **Kaunas Technological University** (Kauno technologijos universitetas),

which has 14,000 students, and the smaller **Vytautas Magnus University** (Vytauto didžiojo universitetas), refounded in 1989 by an émigré Lithuanian.

The **Military Museum of Vytautas the Great** (Vytauto didžiojo karo muziejus; ☎ 320 939; Donelaičio gatvė 64; adult/child 2/1Lt; ☎ 11am–6pm Wed–Sun) covers Lithuanian history from prehistoric times to the present day. Of particular interest is the wreckage of the aircraft in which Steponas Darius and Stasys Girėnas died while attempting to fly nonstop from New York to Kaunas in 1933 (see boxed text, p335).

In the same building (entrance at the back) is the **National Čiurlionis Art Museum** (Nacionalinis Čiurlionio dailės muziejus; ☎ 221 417; Putvinskio gatvė 55; adult/child 5/2.50Lt; ☎ 11am–5pm Tue–Sun), Kaunas' leading museum. It has extensive collections of the romantic paintings of Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis (1875–1911), one of Lithuania's greatest artists and composers, as well as Lithuanian folk art and 16th- to 20th-century European applied art.

Diabolical is the collection of 2000-odd devil statuettes in the **Museum of Devils** (Veln-iukai; ☎ 221 587; Putvinskio gatvė 64; adult/child 5/2.50Lt; ☎ 11am–5pm Tue–Sun), collected by landscape artist Antanas Žmuidzinavičius (1876–1966). Note the satanic figures of Hitler and Stalin, performing a deadly dance over Lithuania.

**Kaunas Picture Gallery** (Kauno paveikslų galerija; ☎ 200 520; Donelaičio gatvė 16; adult/student 3/1.50Lt; ☎ 11am–5pm Tue–Sun) has a tribute to Jurgis Mačiūnas, the father of avant-garde movement, Fluxus.

### NINTH FORT

Lithuania's brutal history is at some of its darkest at the **Ninth Fort** (IX Fortas; ☎ 377 715; Žemaičių plentas 73; adult/child 5/3Lt; ☎ 10am–6pm Wed–Mon Mar–Nov, 10am–4pm Wed–Sun Dec–Feb), built on Kaunas' northwestern outskirts in the late 19th century to fortify the western frontier of the tsarist empire. During WWII the Nazis made it a death camp where 80,000 people, including most of Kaunas' Jewish population, were butchered. Later it became a prison and execution site by Stalin's henchmen.

The museum has exhibits on the Nazi horrors against Jews, and also includes material on Soviet atrocities against Lithuanians. Take bus 35 or 23 from the bus station to the IX Fortas bus stop, 7km out of town, then walk for 1km.

### KAUNAS HEROES

Beloved Lithuanian pilots Steponas Darius and Stanislovas Girėnas died on 15 July 1933, 650km short of completing the longest nonstop trans-Atlantic flight. Two days after the duo set off from New York, 25,000 people gathered at Kaunas airport for their triumphant return. They never arrived. Their orange plane *Lituania* crashed in Germany; see the wreckage in the Military Museum of Vytautas the Great (p335). After being embalmed, then hidden during Soviet occupation, the bodies came to rest at **Aukštėjių Šančiai Cemetery** (Asmenos gatvė 1) in 1964.

Kaunas-based Japanese diplomat Chiune Sugihara (1900–86) saved 12,000 Jewish lives between 1939 and 1940, issuing transit visas to stranded Polish Jews who faced being forced into Soviet citizenship. When the Soviets annexed Lithuania and ordered all consulates be shut he asked for a short extension. Dubbed 'Japan's Schindler', he disobeyed orders for 29 days by signing 300 visas per day, and handed the stamp to a Jewish refugee when he left. **Sugihara House** (Sugiharos namai; ☎ 423 277; www.sugihara-foundation.com; Vaižganto gatvė 30; admission free; ☎ 10am–5pm Mon–Fri, 11am–4pm Sat & Sun) tells his life story.

The **Museum of Deportation & Resistance** (Rezistencijos ir tremties muziejus; ☎ 323 179; Vytauto prospektas 46; admission free; ☎ 10am–4pm Thu–Sun) documents the Resistance spirit embodied by the Forest Brothers, who fought the Soviet occupation. Led by Jonas Žemaitis-Vytautas (1909–54), 100,000 men went into Lithuania's forests to battle the tyrannical regime. One-third were killed, the rest captured and deported. Fighting continued until 1954 when the last partisan was shot.

One of the most desperate anti-Soviet actions was the suicide of Kaunas student Romas Kalanta. On 14 May 1972 he doused himself in petrol and set fire to himself in protest at tyrannical communist rule. A suicide note was found in his diary explaining why.

## PARKS & GARDENS

**Vytautas Park** occupies the slope up from the end of Laisvės alėja to the stadium, along which stretches the lovely **Ažuolynas Park**. South along Vytauto prospektas is **Ramybės Park**, home to the Old City Cemetery until the Soviets tore up all the graves in the 1960s.

Gardening buffs will enjoy the **Kaunas Botanical Gardens** (Kauno botanikos sodas; ☎ 390 033; www.vdu.lt; Žiliberio gatvė 6; park adult/5-12yr 2/1Lt, park & greenhouses adult/5-12yr 4/1Lt; ☎ 8am-4.45pm Mon-Thu, 8am-6pm Fri, 10am-6pm Sat & Sun) where university gardeners tend rare and wonderful plants in a 1920s manor-house garden.

## Festivals & Events

Kaunas' social diary highlights are April's four-day **International Jazz Festival** (www.kau.nasjazz.lt) and the open-air **Operetta in Kaunas Castle**, held for two weeks in the castle ruins in late June-early July.

For classical fans, the **Pažaislis Music Festival** (p339) has concerts in the courtyards and churches of Pažaislis Monastery each year May to August.

## Sleeping

The tourist office has a list of farms where you can stay for 20Lt to 200Lt a night.

## BUDGET & MIDRANGE

**Litinterp** (☎ 228 718; www.lintinterp.lt; Gedimino gatvė 28/7; s/d/tr from 70/120/180Lt; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat) comes to the rescue for

budget travellers and those seeking homely touches, with a clutch of apartments and B&B rooms in private homes. It also rents bicycles. Take trolleybus 7 or 1 from the bus station and get off at the third stop.

**Kauno Arkivykupijos Svečių Namai** (☎ 322 597; http://kaunas.lcn.lt; Rotušės aikštė 21; s/d/tr 50/80/100Lt) This charming guesthouse, run by the Lithuanian Catholic Church, sits snugly wedged between centuries-old churches in Old Town – making it the envy of every Kaunas hotelier. Accommodation at a price that won't break the bank makes it a dream come true for budget travellers.

**Metropolis** (☎ 205 992; metropolis@takiojineris.com; Daukanto gatvė 21; s/d/tr/ste 70/120/135/150Lt) This budget hotel with strong overtones of past grandeur is a rare breed. Sculpted-stone balconies overlook a leafy street; a hefty wooden turnstile door sweeps guests into a lobby with moulded ceiling; and age-old furnishings only add to the charm. As the name in Lithuanian and Russian outside says, it was called Hotel Lietuva in the USSR.

**Kunigaikščių menė** (☎ 320 872; mene@takas.lt; Daukšos gatvė 28; s/d 200/250Lt; ☎) This sweet choice down a cobbled street in Old Town consists of eight well-kept, comfortable rooms above a run-of-the-mill and unpretentious café.

**Takioji Neris** (☎ 306 100; www.takiojineris.com; Donelaičio gatvė 27; economy s/d/tr 120/200/300Lt, standard s/d/tr 180/300/260Lt, business s/d/apt with sauna 280/360/750; ☎) From outside, Kaunas' Soviet-era block holds zero appeal. But step inside and be surprised: Soviet stained glass fuses with contemporary renovations to make this 179-room hotel, popular for its size with tour groups, a nice place to stay. Economy rooms tout decades-old furnishings, but standard and business rooms are mod.

## TOP END

**Kaunas Hotel** (☎ 750 850; www.kaunashotel.lt; Laisvės alėja 79; d/tr/ste from 320/600/500Lt; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) This swanky five-floor, four-star pillow parlour, dates from 1892. Glass fronts the top floor where room 512 sports a peek-if-you-dare glass-walled bathroom overlooking Laisvės alėja and Žaliakalnis. The hotel is a free wi-fi zone and guests can use the business centre for 20Lt per hour. Hotel restaurant 55° in a red-brick cellar is a must-dine.

**Daniela** (☎ 321 505; www.danielahotel.lt; Mickevičiaus gatvė 28; s/d/ste from 320/370/500Lt; ☎ ☎) A retro-

chic hotel owned by basketball hero Arvydas Sabonis, 30-room Daniela has plans to double in size – although rooms in the new block will be of a more midrange calibre. Furnishings are fun and bold; think soft pink chairs, steely mezzanines and extra-large bouncy sofas. Western costs an extra 5Lt a night.

**Best Western Santakos** (☎ 302 702; www.santaka.lt; Grudžio gatvė 21; s/d/ste 360/480/880Lt; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) The industrial warehouse-style building in which this Best Western chain hotel resides is its most unique feature. Otherwise heavy furnishings add an oppressive air to the summer heat – as does the TV set that blares Soviet-style in reception. Sauna and pool are free to guests between 7am and 10am (100Lt an hour at other times).

## Eating

Dining in Kaunas is cheaper than in Vilnius but lacks imagination and can be of poor quality.

**Senieji Rūsiai** (literally 'Old Cellars'; ☎ 202 806; Vilniaus gatvė 34; meals from 50Lt; ☎ 11am-midnight Mon-Thu & Sun, 11am-2am Fri & Sat) Hands down the tastiest street terrace at which to dine, drink and soak up Old Town, this candlelit 17th-century cellar grills great meats and serves a funky chicken filet with fruity curry sauce.

**Avily** (☎ 203 476; Vilniaus gatvė 34; meals from 50Lt; ☎ 11am-midnight Mon-Thu & Sun, to 2am Fri & Sat) Sharing the same terrace as Senieji Rūsiai, Avily is an award-winning brewery that serves unusual beers to a discerning crowd. Dining – reason itself to come here – overlooks the street or is underground.

**Presto** (☎ 221 087; Laisvės alėja 90; meals 30Lt) The food is nothing to write home about, but Presto punters don't seem to care. The terrace on the main drag proffers fine church-dome and people-watching views against a tasteful backdrop of jazz and blues.

**Miesto Sodas** (☎ 424 424; Laisvės alėja 93; meals 20-30Lt) Trendy Miesto Sodas has a cool club, Siena (p337) in its basement and a varied menu. Sip on fresh carrot or beetroot juice and pick from wok-fried BBQ spare ribs, a T-bone steak, cold berry soup or a typically Lithuanian herring filet in the company of marinated red onions, sour cream and baked potatoes. Service can be snail-slow.

**Bernelių Užėja** (☎ 200 913; meals 30-50Lt; Valančiaus (Valančiaus gatvė 9); Donelaičio (Donelaičio gatvė 11) If it's rustic Lithuanian cuisine served by fair maidens in traditional dress that you're

after, then this twinset of wooden country inns in the middle of town is for you.

Central supermarkets:

**Iki** (Jonavos gatvė 3)

**Minima** (Kęstučio gatvė 55)

## Drinking

**Kavos Klubas** (Coffee Club ☎ 229 669; Valančiaus gatvė 19; ☎ 9am-11pm Mon-Sat, to 7pm Sun) There's a definite bookish air to Coffee Club, a cosy winter hide-out in Old Town where fresh, aromatic coffee beans rule. Thirty-odd coffee types straddle the central bar and seating is around small tables that almost shout 'sit up straight, shoulders back'.

**B.O.** (☎ 206 542; Muitinės gatvė 9; ☎ 6pm-2am Mon-Thu & Sun, to 3am Fri & Sat) This laid-back bar whose name is short for 'Blue Orange' is a student hang-out where a drunken bunch while away the wee hours of the weekend.

**Bumerangas** (Naugardo gatvė 6; ☎ 10am-midnight Mon-Fri, noon-midnight Sat) Around the corner and just as debauched.

**Crazy House Užėja** (☎ 221 182; Vilniaus gatvė 16; ☎ 11am-midnight Mon-Thu & Sun, to 2am Fri & Sat) Love it or hate it (we hated it), this crazy house has pneumatic furniture that moves after 6pm.

## Entertainment

Check daily newspaper **Kauno diena** (www.kaunodiena.lt) for listings.

## NIGHTCLUBS

**City Metro** (☎ 8-683 73043; www.citymetro.lt; Daukanto gatvė 19; admission 5-10Lt) Mix Ibiza, Viva la Fiesta and City Mix with DJ Tomie are the varied sounds to blast out of this steely hip club inspired by a metro.

Other clubs:

**Ex-It** (☎ 202 813; Jakšto gatvė 4)

**Siena** (☎ 424 424; www.siena.lt; Laisvės alėja 93)

**Los Patrankos** (☎ 338 228; www.lospatrankos.lt; Savanorių prospektas 124)

## CINEMAS

Watch an English-language film at **Planeta** (☎ 338 330; Vytauto prospektas 6) or **Romuva** (☎ 324 212; Laisvės alėja 54).

## THEATRE & CLASSICAL MUSIC

Original dramas take to the stage at the innovative **Kaunas Academic Drama Theatre** (Akademiniškosios dramos teatras; ☎ 224 064; www.dramosteatras.lt; Laisvės alėja 71) and the **Youth Chamber Theatre** (Jaunimo

## THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

**Apple Hotel** (☎ 321 404; Valančiaus gatvė 19; www.applehotel.lt; s/d with shared bathroom 135/145Lt, standard s/d 140/150Lt, lux s/d 160/170; ☎ ☎) Set on Old Town's edge in a courtyard, this budget hotel is fantastic. Inspired by a cheap, tasty green apple, its 14 rooms are stylishly furnished with white linens, modern white-tiled bathrooms with the odd dash of bold colour and minimalist white blinds. Six cheaper rooms share a bathroom between two, while lux doubles are bigger than their standard counterparts. Staff – recognisable by the apple-motif ties they sport – go out of their way to please and bring breakfast (6.50Lt) on a tray to your room. A computer sits in reception for guests to use.

kamerinis teatras; ☎ 228 226; www.kamerinisteatras; Kęstučio gatvė 74a). Puppets enchant at the **Kaunas Puppet Theatre** (Kauno valstybinis lėlių teatras; ☎ 221 691; www.kaunoles.lt; Laisvės alėja 87a).

The **Kaunas Philharmonic** (Kauno filharmonija; ☎ 200 478; www.kaunofilharmonija.lt; Sapiegos gatvė 5) is the main concert hall for classical music, and operas fill the **Kaunas Musical Theatre** (Muzikinis teatras; ☎ 200 933; www.muzikinisteatras.lt; Laisvės alėja 91).

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

From **Kaunas International Airport** (☎ 399 307; www.kaunasair.lt; Savanorių prospektas), 10km north of Kaunas, **AirLithuania** (☎ 7007 0777, 399 401; kaunas@airlithuania.lt; Kęstučio gatvė 69) flies to/from Hamburg, Oslo, Billund, Munich and Cologne via Palanga.

No-frills airline **Ryanair** (www.ryanair.com) operates flights to/from London's Stansted Airport; see p394.

### BOAT

By the time you read this **Nemuno Linija** (☎ 8-674 84898; www.nemunolinija.lt) will operate regular boats between Kaunas and Rusnė (Nemunas Delta), and between Kaunas and Nida (Curonian Spit). Daily hydrofoils depart from Kaunas/Nida at 8am/3.30pm. Sailing time is four hours and a one-way fare for adult/children aged under six is 99Lt/48Lt.

### BUS

At the **long-distance bus station** (☎ 409 060; Vytauto prospektas 24), buy tickets for domestic destinations in the main booking hall and tickets for international journeys at the **International Booking Office** (Tarptautinių autobusų bilietų kasa; ☎ 322 222; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon, Tue & Fri, 8.30am-8pm Wed, 8.30am-6.45pm Sat, noon-8pm Sun). For bus info, consult the timetable on the wall or challenge the **information desk** (☎ 7am-8pm).

Tickets for **Kautra** (www.kautra.lt) buses throughout Lithuania and most international destinations (p396) are also sold in town at **EuroLines** (☎ 209 836; Laisvės alėja 36; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat), inside the tourist office.

Daily services within the Baltics include the following:

**Druskininkai** 19Lt, two to three hours, six buses via Alytus.

**Klaipėda** 334Lt, three hours, 10 buses.

**Marijampolė** 10Lt, 1½ hours, about nine buses.

**Palanga** 36Lt, 3½ hours, about 11 buses.

**Panevėžys** 17Lt, two hours, about 20 buses.

**Riga** 40.50Lt, 3½ hours, one bus.

**Šiauliai** 22.50Lt to 26Lt, three hours, 20 buses.

**Tallinn** 100Lt, 12 hours, one bus.

**Vilnius** 14.50Lt, 1½ to two hours, about 20 buses.

**Visaginas** 29.50Lt, four hours, two buses.

### CAR & MOTORCYCLE

**Litinterp** (☎ 228 718; www.litinterp.lt; Gedimino gatvė 28-7) Car rental.

### TRAIN

From the **train station** (☎ 221 093; Čiurlonio gatvė 16) there are up to 16 trains daily to/from Vilnius (11Lt, 1¼ to two hours) and an overnight bus to/from Klaipėda (25Lt, six hours).

## Getting Around

Buses and trolleybuses run from 5am to 11pm and tickets cost 0.90Lt from newspaper kiosks or 1Lt from the driver. Mini-buses shadow routes and run later than regular buses; drivers sell tickets for 1.20Lt. The tourist office sells a public transport map detailing all routes for 3Lt.

To get to/from the airport, take mini-bus 120 from the local bus station on Šv Gertrūdos gatvė. Buses depart every five minutes between 6am and 11pm.

Trolleybuses 1, 5 and 7 run north from the train station along Vytauto prospektas, west along Kęstučio gatvė and Nemuno gatvė, then north on Birštono gatvė. Returning, they head east along Šv Gertrūdos gatvė, Ožėškienės gatvė and Donelaičio gatvė, then south down Vytauto prospektas to the bus and train stations.

Ordering a taxi by telephone (☎ 366 666) is safer than hopping into a car on the street.

## Around Kaunas

### PAŽAISLIS MONASTERY

This fine example of 17th-century baroque architecture is 9km east of the centre, near the shores of **Kaunas Sea** (Kauno marios), a large artificial lake. The monastery church with its 50m-high cupola and sumptuous Venetian interior made from pink and black Polish marble is a sumptuous if shabby affair. Passing from Catholic to Orthodox to Catholic control, the monastery has a chequered history and was a psychiatric hospital for

part of the Soviet era. Nuns inhabit it today. The best time to visit is between June and August during the **Pažaislis Music Festival** (www.pazaislis.lt). Take trolleybus 5, 9 or 12 to the terminus on Masiulio gatvė, a few hundred metres before **Pažaislis Monastery** (☎ 37-456 485; Masiulio gatvė 31; admission free; mass ☎ 11am Sun).

### Rumšiškės

Go back in time at the **Open-Air Museum of Lithuania** (Lietuvių liaudies buities muziejus; ☎ 346-47 392; Neris gatvė 6; adult/child with car 10/7Lt, on foot 6/3Lt; ☎ 10am-6pm Wed-Sun May-Oct, upon request only Nov-Apr), where four villages of 18th- and 19th-century buildings represent Lithuania's four main regions. Potters, weavers and joiners demonstrate their crafts in the museum workshop. Rumšiškės is 20km east of Kaunas, about 2km off the Vilnius road.

### BIRŠTONAS

☎ 319

Some 40km south of Kaunas is the small spa town of Birštonas, host to the springtime three-day jazz festival **Birštonas Jazz** (http://jazz.birstonas.lt), which in even-numbered years unites Lithuania's top jazz musicians with fans by the lorryload. At other times, its unique position in a loop of the Nemunas River makes it a sweet spot to relax.

The **tourist office** (☎ 65 740; www.birstonas.lt; Jau-nimo gatvė 3) rents bicycles and boats and has information on accommodation options, including three old-style *sanatorijos*. For riverside activities, contact the visitor centre of the **Nemunas Crook Regional Park** (Nemuno kilpų regioninio parko; ☎ 65 610; nkrp@korbas.lt; Tyloji gatvė 1).

From Kaunas bus station there are buses every half hour to/from **Birštonas bus station** (☎ 52 333; Tumo Vaižganto gatvė 20).

## ŠIAULIAI

☎ 41 / pop 147,000

Lithuania's fourth-largest city is overshadowed by the incredible Hill of Crosses 10km north. But despite this – and plague, fires and battles – Šiauliai has survived its troubled history to become an eccentric, thriving city 140km north of Kaunas. It is also the main centre of the northwestern Samogitia (Žemaitija) region.

TV sets, Black Panther bicycles, milk and Gubernija beer are in the mixed bag of products manufactured in town – a mildly shabby place yet to see better days. Its main

pedestrian street, Vilniaus gatvė, is due a complete face-lift, while the transformation of its Soviet military airfield – the USSR's largest airbase outside Russia, not mapped until 1991 – into a tourist attraction promises an interesting new future for Šiauliai.

## Information

Get cash with Visa/MasterCard from ATMs outside banks at Vilniaus gatvė 116, Tilžės gatvė 157 and Tilžės gatvė 149.

**Post office** (Aušros alėja 42)

**Sela** (Dvaro gatvė; per hr 2lt; ☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Fri, 10am-8pm Sat & Sun) Internet saloon.

**Tourist office** (☎ 523 110; www.siauliai.lt; Vilniaus gatvė 213; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat, 10am-4pm Sun) Sells maps and guides, including cycling itineraries to the Hill of Crosses; rents bicycles for 3Lt an hour; makes accommodation bookings and arranges guided tours of the Soviet airbase (p340).

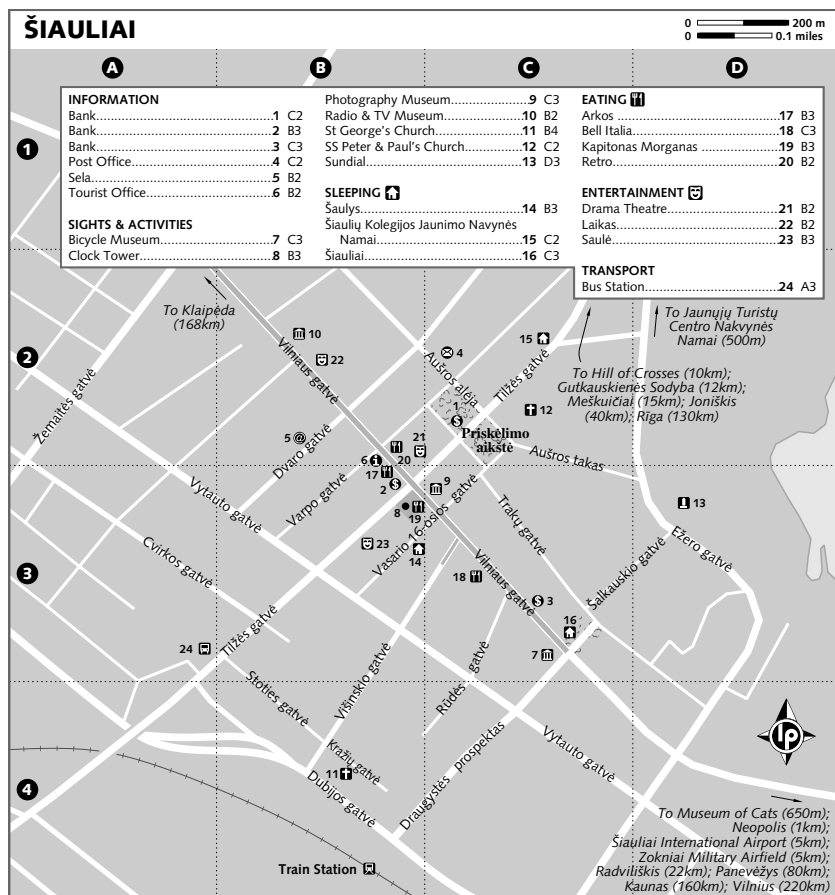
## Sights

### TOWN CENTRE

**St Peter & Paul's Cathedral** (Šv Petro ir Povilo bažnyčia; Aušros takas 3), overlooking Priskėlimo aikštė, was constructed between 1595 and 1625 from the proceeds of the sale of four-year-old bulls donated by local farmers. It has a 75m spire – Lithuania's second highest – and legend says the hillock it stands on was created from sand and dust which blew over a dead ox that wandered into Šiauliai, sat down and died. **St George's Church** (Šv Jurgio bažnyčia; Kražių gatvė 17) was built for the local Russian garrison in 1909 but is Catholic today.

A distinctive city landmark is the mammoth **sundial** (cnr Salkauskio gatvė & Ežero gatvė), topped by a bronze statue of an archer in what has become known as 'Sundial Square'. It was built in 1986 to commemorate the 750th anniversary of the Battle of Saulė (1236), the battle in which local Samogitians defeated the Knights of the Sword and founded the town.

Šiauliai has an eccentric museum collection: the **Radio & TV Museum** (Radio ir televizijos muziejus; ☎ 524 399; Vilniaus gatvė 174; adult/child 2/1Lt; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Fri, 11am-4pm Sat), **Museum of Cats** (Katinų muziejus; ☎ 523 883; igs@spilus.lt; Žuvininkų gatvė 18; adult/child 2/1Lt; ☎ 11am-5pm Wed-Sun), **Photography Museum** (Fotografijos muziejus; ☎ 524 396; Vilniaus gatvė 140; adult/child 2/1Lt; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Fri, 11am-4pm Sat), and a **Bicycle Museum** (Dviraičių muziejus; ☎ 524 395; Vilniaus gatvė



139; adult/child 2/1lt; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Fri, 11am-4pm Sat) where bone-jolting wood and iron bicycles without tyres stand next to orange and pink communal bikes introduced by Vilnius City Municipality in the late 1990s (they were stolen within days) and mean speed machines made by Lithuania's biggest bicycle manufacturer, Šiauliai-based Balti Vairas (Black Panther).

#### ZOKNIAI MILITARY AIRFIELD

In Soviet times this airfield with two 3.5km-long and 45m-wide runways – large enough to land a space shuttle – was the USSR's biggest military base outside Russia, used to defend its western border. The last of its 55,000 troops based here left in 1993, and

since 2004 the Lithuanian air base has been used by NATO forces to patrol Baltic skies.

Guided tours take you around the airfield, built in 1935 and much of it in a shocking state of crumbling disrepair after 10 years of abandonment. Many of the 50 or so Soviet aircraft hangars once housing MiG-29 fighters remain, as do the subterranean command post, sturdy enough to survive nuclear attack, and the fuel reserves, a lucrative source of income in Soviet times for enterprising locals who syphoned off fuel from the underground tanks!

About 120 NATO personnel and four F-16 jet fighters are currently stationed at Zokniai. NATO countries take three-month turns to defend Baltic air space: Belgium,

Denmark, the UK, Norway, the Netherlands and Germany and the US have already done QRA (Quick Reaction Alert) stints. By 2008 it is estimated that NATO will have invested €59 million into Zokniai; in 2004 €563,000 was allocated to rebuild its legendary runway, for which no aircraft is too big.

Tours last two hours and must be booked at the tourist office at least one week in advance. Price is dependent on numbers; groups of 30 pay 15Lt each and ride to the base, on the southeastern edge of town, in an old Soviet bus; groups of four can expect to pay 100Lt each.

#### HILL OF CROSSES

This 'Mecca of Lithuania' – thousands upon thousands of crosses on a hillock – has inspired countless pilgrimages. Large and tiny, expensive and cheap, wood and metal, the crosses are devotional, to accompany prayers, or finely carved folk-art masterpieces. Oth-

ers are memorials, tagged with flowers, a photograph or other mementoes in memory of the deceased, and inscribed with a sweet or sacred message. Traditional Lithuanian *koplytstulpis* (wooden sculptures of a figure topped with a little roof) intersperse the crosses, as do magnificent sculptures of the Sorrowful Christ (Rūpintojėlis). If you wish to add your own, souvenir traders in the car park sell crosses big and small.

An alternative view of the cross-swamped hill is from inside the chapel of the modern brick **monastery**. Home to 10 Franciscan monks, it was built behind the hill between 1997 and 2000 – allegedly upon the wishes of John Paul II who said he wished to see a place of prayer following after his visit in 1993. Behind the altar in the church, the striking backdrop through the ceiling-to-floor window of the Hill of Crosses in place of a traditional crucifix is breathtaking; Italian architect Angelo Polesello designed it.

#### CROSS CRAFTING

Crosses were once symbols of sacred fervour and national identity, both Pagan and Catholic; cross crafting – a Unesco-protected tradition since 2001 – is the embodiment of Lithuanian contradiction.

Handed down from master to pupil, the crosses were carved from oak, the sacred pagan tree. They were made as offerings to gods, draped with food, coloured scarves (for a wedding) or aprons (for fertility). Once consecrated by priests, they became linked with Christian ceremonies in unmistakable sacred significance. The crosses, which measure up to 5m, then became symbols of defiance against occupation.

When it comes to explaining the origin of the Hill of Crosses, there are almost as many myths as crosses. Some claim it was built in three days and three nights by the bereaved families of warriors killed in a great battle. Others say it was the work of a father who, in a desperate bid to cure his sick daughter, planted a cross on the hill. Pagan traditions tell stories of sacred fires being lit here and tended by celestial virgins.

Crosses first appeared here in the 14th century. They multiplied after bloody antisarist uprisings to become this potent symbol of suffering and hope.

During the Soviet era planting a cross was an arrestable offence – but pilgrims kept coming to commemorate the thousands killed and deported. The hill was bulldozed at least three times. In 1961 the Red Army destroyed the 2000-odd crosses that stood on the mound, sealed off the tracks leading to the hill and dug ditches at its base, yet overnight more crosses appeared. In 1972 they were destroyed after the immolation of a Kaunas student (p335) in protest at Soviet occupation. But by 1990 the Hill of Crosses comprised a staggering 40,000 crosses, spanning 4600 sq metres. Since independence, they have multiplied at least 10 times – and still are. In 1993 Pope John Paul II celebrated mass here (his pulpit still stands) and graced the hill a year later with a papal cross, adding his own message to the mountain of scribbled-on crosses: 'Thank you, Lithuanians, for this Hill of Crosses which testifies to the nations of Europe and to the whole world the faith of the people of this land'.

New crosses now stand to commemorate those who perished in the 2001 Twin Towers attack in New York and subsequent terrorist attacks elsewhere. The spirit continues, the hill grows and the sound of the crosses rattling in the wind becomes yet more sobering.

The Hill of Crosses (Kryžių kalnas) is 10km north of Šiauliai, 2km east off the road to Joniškis and Riga, in the village of Jurgaičiai. To get here, take one of eight daily buses from Šiauliai bus station to Joniškis or one of eight to Riga and get off at the Domantai stop, from where it is a 2km walk to the hill. Look for the sign 'Kryžių kalnas 2' on the A12. By taxi, the return taxi fare is 30Lt, with a 30-minute stop at the hill; ask Šiauliai tourist office or your hotel/hostel to order one for you by telephone to avoid being ripped off. By bicycle the Hill of Crosses is a 12km ride; allow at least three hours for the return trip. The tourist office rents bikes and has route maps.

## Sleeping

The tourist office has information on home-stay accommodation around Šiauliai.

**Šiauliai College Youth Hostel** (Šiaulių Kolegijos Jaunimo Navynės Namai; ☎ 523 764; administracija@siauliaikolegija.lt; Tilžės gatvė 159; s/d/tr/q 50/60/75/100Lt; reception ☎ 7am-11pm; P) Reception is unhelpful. That said, this former college has been renovated with EU funds to create a spanking clean and sparkling, state-of-the-art hostel with kitchen and TV room.

**Saulys** (☎ 520 812; www.saulys.lt; Vasario 16-osios gatvė 40; s/d/tr/apt from 180/250/350/500Lt; P) With a pool and a sauna, this is Šiauliai's swankiest choice. Four stars twinkle from its deep-red façade, its bright and spacious lobby buzzes with activity and

it organises paragliding and parachuting expeditions for the truly adventurous.

**Šiauliai** (☎ 437 333; Draugystės prospektas 25; s/d/tr from 70/100/180; P) The town's old Soviet hotel is spectacularly ugly but does have great views 14 storeys high!

## Eating

**Arkos** (☎ 520 205; Vilniaus gatvė 213; meals 20-30Lt) This eating-drinking joint in a brick cellar caters to all. Whether you want a simple beer with deep-fried garlic bread sticks, a teatime pancake or dinner, you'll be sure of a tasty time. Service can be slow but the detailed scenes of rural Lithuania painted on the walls provide distraction.

**Bell Italia** (☎ 520 866; Vilniaus gatvė 167; meals 20-30Lt) Bell Italia is a young, fun and sparkling yellow-blue pizza place that cooks up delicious Italian food, including a 'viagra pizza' – guaranteed to fire you up!

**Retro** (☎ 521 202; retro@splius.lt; Vilniaus gatvė 146; meals 40Lt) Discerning diners seeking fine art and sculptures to view while they eat should not miss this hybrid art gallery–restaurant.

**Kapitonas Morganas** (☎ 526 477; Vilniaus gatvė 183; meals 20-40Lt) Come to Captain Morgan's jolly pirate ship to meet happy punters busily eating European fodder, drinking local beer and merrymaking on a great street terrace.

## Entertainment

Spend the evening at the **Drama Theatre** (☎ 432 940; Tilžės gatvė 155), watching an English-language flick at **Laikas** (☎ 525 208; Vilniaus gatvė 172) or **Saulė** (☎ 524 983; www.saule.lt; Tilžės gatvė 140), or bowling and boogieing at **Neopolis** (☎ 521 542; www.neopolis.lt; Vilniaus gatvė 47; bowling per hr 40-60Lt; ☎ noon-3am), an out-of-town entertainment centre with a nightclub.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

**Šiauliai International Airport** (☎ 542 005; www.airport.siauliai.lt), adjoining Zokniai Military Airfield on the southeastern edge of town, has only been used by cargo planes since it opened in 1997, but there is talk of a no-frills budget German airline flying here soon.

### BUS

Services from Šiauliai **bus station** (☎ 525 058; Tilžės gatvė 109):  
**Kaunas** 22.50Lt to 26Lt, three hours, 20 buses.  
**Klaipėda** 23Lt, 2½ hours, six buses.

**Palanga** 22Lt, 2½ hours, about 10 daily.

**Panevėžys** 11Lt, 1½ hours, 12 daily.

**Riga** 16Lt, two to three hours, eight daily.

**Vilnius** 29Lt, 4½ hours, seven daily.

### TRAIN

Services to/from Šiauliai **train station** (☎ 430 652; Dubijos gatvė 44):

**Klaipėda** 16.50Lt, two to three hours, six daily.

**Riga** 16Lt, 2½ hours, one to three daily.

**Vilnius** 26Lt, 2¾ to 3½ hours, five to eight daily.

## RADVILIŠKIS & AROUND

Grim, grimy **Radviliškis** (population 21,000), 22km southeast of Šiauliai, is notable only as the central hub of the rail network, but there are a couple of interesting stops on the 55km stretch of the A9 heading east towards Panevėžys.

**Šeduva**, a 16th-century architectural monument 10km east of Radviliškis, is a large village with a yellow-and-white baroque church framed by cobbled streets and a small **Ethnographic Exhibition** (Šeduvos kraštotyros ekspozicija; Verisikių gatvė 7; adult/child 1/0.50Lt; ☎ 9am-4pm Tue-Sun) in a tannery (1884). Its main draw is a naff restaurant inside a windmill (1905). Dining at **Šeduvos Malūnas** (☎ 422-56 300, 8-687 70690; meals 20-40Lt), also called Velnių Malūnas (Devil's Mill), is on four levels around the windmill's original central-core cog mechanism. Cuisine is Lithuanian and a hotel in a modern building next door provides accommodation (double 80Lt, parking available) without breakfast. The mill is signposted off the A9 immediately west of Šeduva.

In **Klebonišķiai**, signposted 5km further east along the A9 to Panevėžys, is another windmill (1884) and – 1km down a dusty road – the **Klebonišķiai Rural Life Exhibition** (Klebonišķių kaimo buitės ekspozicija; ☎ 422-63674; adult/student 6/3Lt, camera 0.50Lt; ☎ 9am-6pm Tue-Sun). The beautiful farmstead, with 19th- and early-20th-century farm buildings, offers a picture-postcard peek at rural Lithuania. The exhibition is part of the **Daugyvenė Cultural History Museum Reserve** (Daugyvenės kultūros istorijos muziejus-draustinis; ☎ 422-51 747), which groups burial grounds, mounds and other local sights.

## Getting There & Away

About 12 buses a day run between Šiauliai and Panevėžys, via Radviliškis. There are buses every half an hour to/from Radviliškis and Šeduva and one a day to/from Vilnius.

There are six to eight daily trains to/from Vilnius (20Lt, 2½ hours), three daily to/from Kaunas (14Lt, three hours) and six daily to/from Klaipėda (17.90Lt, 2½ hours).

## PANEVĖŽYS

☎ 45 / pop 119,000

Known as the 'Chicago of Lithuania' for crime and mafia dealings, Panevėžys has done serious work on its image. Emerging from post-Soviet industrial collapse, it boasts a prestigious theatrical tradition, a charming riverbed lake and a thriving art scene.

Lithuania's fifth-largest city, it lies 140km north of Vilnius on the Nevėžis River and on the Riga highway. It was founded in 1503 and it claims to be the most Lithuanian of Lithuanian towns: Lithuanians comprise 96% of its population.

Economic turnaround aide, Panevėžys is still largely a manufacturing base – and a far cry from a tourist hot spot. Few people really stop here bar to change bus or to stop for something to eat en route to Riga from Vilnius.

## Orientation

At the centre is Laisvės aikštė, bordered at its northern end by east–west Elektros gatvė and at its southern end by Vilniaus gatvė. Basanavičiaus gatvė runs north to the Riga

### THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

**Smuklė Žarija** (☎ 422-43 340, 8-615 11527; www.smuklezarija.lt; meals 20Lt; P) It might be next to the Panevėžys–Šiauliai motorway (A9), 5km west of Šeduva and 10km east of Radviliškis, but this inn on the shore of Lake Arimaičių could not make a more original pit stop. Toothy-grinned gnomes and dozens of other intricately carved wooden sculptures greet punters who flock here for superb shashlik, grilled meats, fish and authentic Lithuanian cuisine. Stuffed birds and a snake add a unique touch to the décor, and a wooden playground outside – complete with old sledge as swing – keeps pint-sized punters amused. There is a lakeside sauna, floating bathroom to relax and swim from, boats to rent and friendly staff at the inn arrange hot-air ballooning. If you eat too much and cannot move, it has a bunch of basic rooms up top (double from 60Lt).

### THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

**Gutkauskienės sodyba** (☎ 8-698 79544, 8-698 34256; www.horse-g.lt; Žačiai village; s/d 50/70Lt; P) This century-old, renovated stud farm is perfect for those keen to skip Šiauliai's drab hotel scene for a taste of rural life. The farmhouse has six charming rooms, an outdoor pool, sauna, plenty of surrounding forest to explore and berries to pick in season – and lots of horses to ride. To get here, head north out of town along the Riga road and pick up the eastbound 150 to Pakruojis. After Ginkūnai turn left (north) towards Naisai and Pašvitinys; follow the road for 5km then turn right (east) towards Žačiai and continue for 1.3km to the farmstead. All up it's about 12km (20 minutes) from Šiauliai.

**PANEVĖŽYS**

0 200 m  
0 0.1 miles

**INFORMATION**

Bank.....	1 B5
Bank.....	2 B5
Post Office.....	3 A3
Tourist Office.....	4 B5

**SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES**

Museum of Regional Studies.....	5 A4
Oldest Building.....	6 A3

**SLEEPING**

Hotel Panevėžys.....	7 B5
Hotel Romantik.....	8 B3

**EATING**

Iki.....	9 B5
Kafen Hauz.....	10 B5

**ENTERTAINMENT**

Juozas Miltinio Drama Theatre.....	11 B5
Wagon Puppet Theatre.....	12 A4

**TRANSPORT**

Bus Station.....	13 B5
Eurolines.....	(see 13)

To Kalnapilis Brewery (800m); Train Station (11km)

road and south to Kaunas and Vilnius. The train station is 2km northwest of the centre, the bus station is on Savanorių aikštė.

### Information

For ATMs and currency exchange, try the banks at Laisvės aikštė 15 and Ukmergės gatvė 18a.

**Left Luggage** (bus station; per 24hr weight depending 2.50-20Lt; ☎ 6am-12.20pm & 1.50-7pm Mon-Fri, 7am-6pm Sat & Sun)

**Post office** (Respublikos gatvė 60)

**Tourist office** (☎ 508 080; www.panevezystic.lt; Laisvės aikštė; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat)

Ultrahelpful staff who, among other things, run beer tours (p345).

### Sights

Triangular-shaped **Laisvės aikštė** is a central tree-lined pedestrianised spot, pleasant for two months in summer and deadly grey the rest of the year. It is surrounded by a few uninspiring cafés and shops and the **Juozas Miltinio Drama Theatre** (☎ 584 614; www.miltinio-teatras.lt; Laisvės aikštė 5), in action since 1940. By the riverbed, a **small bridge** and **statues** – including an irresistible one of a standing man playing chess – make for a pleasant stroll.

The tiny **Museum of Regional Studies** (Kraštotyros muziejus; ☎ 461 973; Vasario 16-osios gatvė 23; adult/child 2/0.50Lt; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sat) focuses on ethnography and hosts temporary exhibitions in the city's **oldest building**, dating to 1614, at Kranto gatvė 21.

A great escape are the magical dolls and puppets in the **Fairytale Train** (Pasakų traukinukas; ☎ 511 236; Respublikos gatvė 30; admission 3-5Lt; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri) of the **Wagon Puppet Theatre**. Lithuania's only travelling cart theatre is rarely at home (it travels all summer), but the characters displayed inside this old narrow-gauge train carriage will enchant.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Hotel Romantik** (☎ 584 860; www.hotel-romantic.lt; Kranto gatvė 24; s/d/ste 190/320/600; P ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Romantic is the tone set by Hotel Romantik, housed in a converted old mill. A couple of original architectural features add an authentic rustic touch and the restaurant terrace – definitely the best place in town to dine – overlooking the park is a delight (meals 40Lt to 70Lt). Guests pay extra to use the adjoining fitness centre and spa.

**Hotel Panevėžys** (☎ 501 601; www.hotelpanevezys.lt; Laisvės aikštė 26; s/d 120/160Lt, standard s/d 140/180Lt, lux s/d 200/220Lt) The landmark Soviet ugliness of what used to be the town's only central hotel is infamous. Beige and brown colour schemes remain king in this 12-storey concrete wonder where the cheapest rooms – yet to be renovated – ensure an authentic Soviet experience.

### BEER TALK

Northern Lithuania is the land of barley-malt beer, ale-makers keeping to ancient recipes and rituals practised by their ancestors 1000 years ago. People here drink 160L of beer a year, say proud locals.

Big-name brews to glug include **Horn** (www.ragutis.lt), brewed in Kaunas since 1853; Šiauliai-made **Gubernija**; and **Kalnapis** from Panevėžys, whose **brewery** (www.kalnapis.lt; Taikos alėja 1), currently closed for a refit, should be welcoming beer tourists by the time you read this. Book tours at Panevėžys tourist office.

Lakeside Biržai, 65km north and the true heart of Lithuanian beer country, hosts the annual two-day **Biržai Beer Festival**, a madcap fiesta of beer-keg throwing and general drunken behaviour. Its **Rinkuškiai Brewery** (☎ 450-35 293; www.rinkuskiai.lt; Alyvų gatvė 8) can be visited, and its beer – everything from light lager to lead-heavy stout – bought in bulk in its factory shop. A lesser-known label to look out for is the sweet **Butautų alaus bravoras**, an ale bottled in brown glass with a ceramic, metal-snap cap like Grolsch. It has been brewed in the village of Butautų since 1750.

**Kafen Hauz** (☎ 461 595; Ukmergės gatvė 3) German-named Coffee House is new, bright and adds a cheery sparkle to Panevėžys' glazed eye. Look for the elevated street terrace below retro stained glass.

**Iki** (Ukmergės gatvė 18a) This supermarket is in the three-storey *prekybos centras* (shopping centre) adjoining the bus station.

### Getting There & Away

Bus tickets for international destinations are sold at **Eurolines** (☎ 582 888; panevezys@eurolines.lt; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 3pm Sat), at the **bus station** (☎ 463 333; Savanorių aikštė 5). Domestic and regional services include buses to/from Vilnius (20Lt, 2¼ hours, about 12 daily), Kaunas (17Lt, two hours, 20 daily), Šiauliai (11Lt, 1½ hours, 12 daily), Riga via Bauska (20Lt, four hours, six daily) and Tallinn via Riga (74Lt, eight hours, three daily).

### ANYKŠČIAI

☎ 381 / pop 13,000

Lovely Anykščiai, 60km southeast of Panevėžys, sits on the confluence of the Sventoji and Anyksta Rivers. Fanning eastwards are 76 lakes, the largest of which – **Lake Rubikiai** (9.68 sq km and 16m deep) – is freckled with 16 islands.

A pine forest 10km south of Anykščiai contains **Puntuko Stone** (Puntuko akmuo), a 5.7m-tall by 6.7m-wide by 6.9m-long boulder that legend says was put there by the devil. In trying to destroy Anykščiai's twin-steeple church, **St Mathew's** (1899-1909), a rooster crowed and the devil thundered to hell – prompting the boulder to thunder down from the sky. The **tourist office** (☎ 59 177, 8-655 27943;

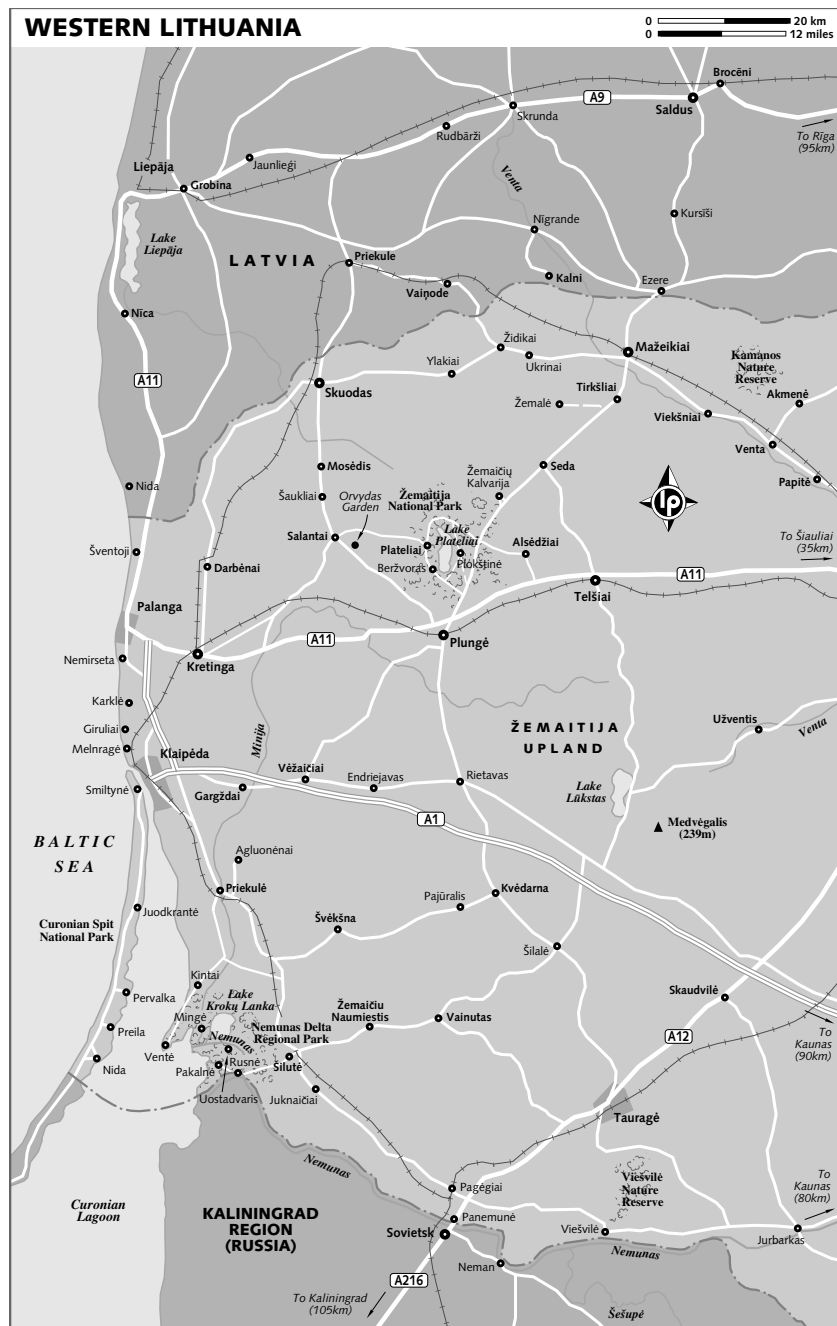
www.anyksčiai.lt; Gegužės gatvė 1; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 3pm Sat) can tell you precisely how to find it.

A steam locomotive is displayed at the **Narrow-Gauge Railway Museum** (Šiaurėjo geležinkelio istorijos ekspozicija; www.baranauskas.lt; Viltis gatvė 2; adult/child 1.50/0.50Lt; ☎ 10am-5pm May-Oct, by appt Nov-Apr), a fun museum for kids housed in Anykščiai's old station that used to be served by cargo trains to Panevėžys (60km west), Šenčionėliai (a major stop on the St Petersburg-Warsaw line, 84km east) and Pastavy in present-day Belarus. The narrow 75cm-wide track here was part of a narrow-gauge rail network operational until the 1970s as a cargo link to the wide-gauge railways. An old rail cycle is the most visitors can ride today.

From the **bus station** (☎ 51 333; Wienuolio gatvė 1) there are buses to/from Panevėžys (three to eight daily), Vilnius (six daily) and Kaunas (13 daily).

## WESTERN LITHUANIA

Lithuania's coastline is magical. Vast empty tracts of wild white sand snuggle up against dunes and scented pine for much of its 99km Baltic stretch, climaxing with a world-unique gem – the Curonian Spit (Kursių Nerija), a skinny leg of sand that stalks into Russia. From the late 19th century East Prussian artists, as well Thomas Mann in the 1930s, artists sought inspiration in one of its fishing villages; French philosopher Sartre was photographed in this wind-sculpted Sahara in 1965; and in 2000 Unesco stepped in to safeguard this anorexic, fragile and extraordinary natural



euro currency converter €1 = 15.64Kr / 0.70Ls / 3.45Lt

**DID YOU KNOW**

Three widths of train track once snaked across Lithuania: narrow-gauge tracks were 75cm wide; Soviet trains ran on tracks 152cm wide; while European trains ran on tracks 143cm wide.

phenomenon, one of the world's most precious sights.

Klaipėda, the country's third-largest city and major port, is the curious gateway to all this overwhelming natural splendour. Called Memel by Germans (it wasn't part of Lithuania until 1923), this busy city with its tiny Old Town and constant flow of ferries forging across the Curonian Lagoon and into the Baltic Sea exudes a definite grit.

Heading north, romantic souls follow in the footsteps of 19th-century amber fishers in the remote seaside hamlet of Karklė and watch new days dawn from the pier in party-mad Palanga – the hottest spot on Lithuania's coast. And if you nip across the border into Latvia from here (best to ignore the vast storage terminals of Būtingė Oil Terminal you pass en route), there's a wacky surprise waiting.

Peace-lovers should head south to wallow in bird song in the Nemunas Delta Regional Park, a boggy wetland where Lithuania's largest river spills into the lagoon, and villagers boat around beneath bird-filled skies. During spring floods an amphibious tractor is the way to get around.

Then there's what many rate as Lithuania's most extraordinary experience – standing on the edge of an abandoned 30m-deep missile silo, built by the Soviets in the secret heart of a national park to fire deadly warheads at Europe.

**Getting There & Around**

Klaipėda – the region's transport hub – is easily reached by train from Vilnius (p354) and by bus (p354) from Vilnius, Kaunas and most other towns in Lithuania, as well as from Riga and Tallinn.

Pedestrian and car ferries (p354) link Klaipėda with Smiltynė on the Curonian Spit, and river boats sail to/from Nida, Rusnė and Kaunas. The Nemunas Delta is impossible to get around without your own vehicle and/or boat.

**KLAIPĖDA**

☎ 46 / pop 202,500

Sea port Klaipėda, 315km west of Vilnius, is the springboard to the natural beauty of the Curonian Spit. But as Lithuania's third-largest city, it is worth a stop in its own right, notably for its Germanic flavour and architecture that reflects its fascinating past as Prussian capital Memel. The city was destroyed in WWII, during which it served as a Nazi submarine base, but a teeny weeny patch of its Old Town survived unscathed – as did one tower of its once magnificent red-brick castle.

Straddling the narrow strait where the Curonian Lagoon opens into the Baltic Sea, the city is Lithuania's only port of call for *Titanic*-sized cruise ships, and a vital sea link for cargo and passenger ferries between Lithuania, Scandinavia and beyond. Klaipėda celebrates its rich nautical heritage each July with a flamboyant five-day **Sea Festival** ([www.juros.svente.lt](http://www.juros.svente.lt)).

**History**

Klaipėda was Memel until 1925. Founded in 1252 by the Teutonic Order who built the city's first castle, it was a key trading port from the 15th century until 1629 when Swedish forces destroyed it. After the Napoleonic wars it became part of Prussia (1807) and stayed in Prussian hands until WWI. The population at this time was an even split of Germans and Lithuanians.

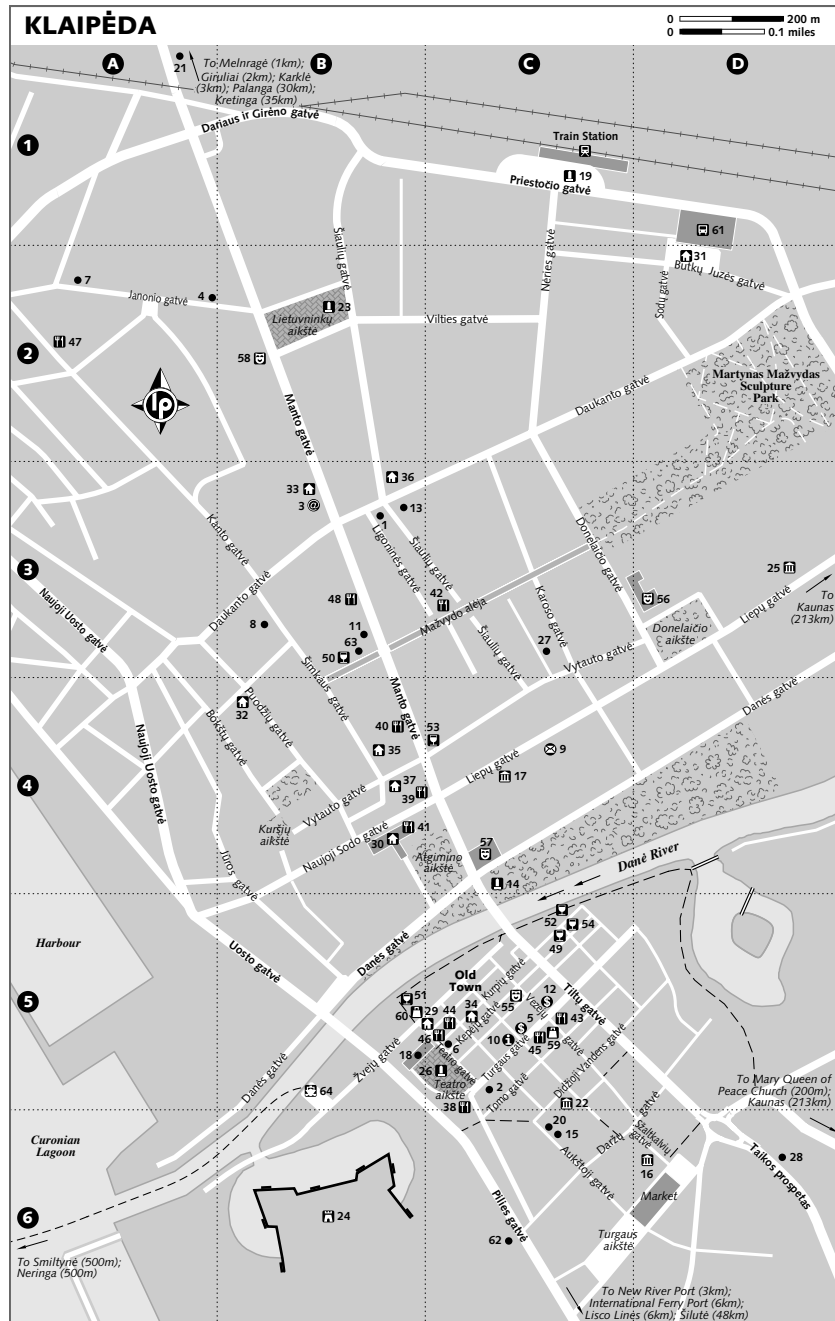
Under the Treaty of Versailles, Memel town, the northern half of the Curonian Spit and a strip of land (about 150km long and 20km wide) along the eastern side of the Curonian Lagoon and the northern side of the Nemunas River were separated from Germany as an 'international territory'. It remained stateless until 1923, when Lithuanian troops marched in, annexed it and changed its name two years later to Klaipėda.

Klaipėda was rebuilt and repopulated after WWII, developing into an important city on the back of shipbuilding and fishing. In 1991 its university opened, followed in 2003 by a new cruise terminal. Few Germans remain today.

**Orientation**

The Danė River flows westward across the city centre and enters the Curonian Lagoon

euro currency converter €1 = 15.64Kr / 0.70Ls / 3.45Lt

**INFORMATION**

Akademija.....	1 B3
Baltic Clipper.....	2 C5
Baltų Lankų.....	3 B3
Bankas Snoras.....	(see 11)
Eurokalbos.....	4 A2
Hansa Bankas.....	5 C5
Krantas Travel.....	6 C5
Lithuanian Student & Youth Travel.....	7 A2
Mėja Travel.....	8 B3
Post Office.....	9 C4
Tourist Office.....	10 C5
Vaga.....	11 B3
Vilniaus Bankas.....	12 C5
West Express.....	13 B3

**SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES**

Ännchen von Tharau Statue... (see 26)	14 C4
Arka.....	15 C6
Baroti Gallery.....	16 D6
Blacksmith's Museum.....	17 C4
Clock Museum.....	18 B5
Drama Theatre.....	19 C1
Farewell.....	20 C6
Klaipėda Art Exhibition Palace.....	21 A1
Klaipėda Castle Museum.....	(see 62)
Klaipėda Castle Museum.....	(see 24)
Klaipėda University.....	21 A1

**Lithuanian Minor History**

Museum.....	22 C5
Martynas Mažvydas Statue.....	23 B2
Old Castle.....	24 B6
Picture Gallery.....	25 D3
Simon Dach Fountain.....	26 C5
Sothys Spa Centras.....	27 C3
Švitytury's Beer Brewery.....	28 D6

**SLEEPING**

Europa Royale.....	29 C5
Hotel Klaipėda.....	30 B4
Klaipėda Travellers Hostel.....	31 D2
Litinterp Guesthouse.....	32 B4
Navalis.....	33 B3
Prelidija Guesthouse.....	34 C5
Prūsija.....	35 B4
Radisson SAS Klaipėda.....	36 B3
Viktorija.....	37 B4

**EATING**

Anikės Teatras.....	38 C5
Bambola Pizza.....	39 B4
Boogie Woogie.....	40 B4
Forto Dvaras.....	41 B4
Iki.....	42 C3
Ikiukas.....	43 C5
Kurpiai.....	44 C5
Pėda.....	45 C5
Senoji Hansa.....	46 C5

Skandalas.....	47 A2
XII.....	(see 30)
Čili Kaimas.....	48 B3

**DRINKING**

Glaja.....	49 C5
Juodojo Katino Smuklė.....	50 B3
Memelis.....	51 B5
Meridianas.....	52 C5
Onyx.....	53 C4
Žvejų Baras.....	54 C5

**ENTERTAINMENT**

Elcalor.....	55 C5
Honolulu.....	(see 30)
Klaipėda University Concert Hall.....	56 D3
Musical Theatre.....	57 C4
Žemaitija Cinema.....	58 B2

**SHOPPING**

Art Gallery Pėda.....	59 C5
Parko Gallery.....	(see 10)
Smelio Krantas.....	60 B5

**TRANSPORT**

Bus Station.....	61 D1
Cruise Ship Terminal Entrance.....	62 C6
Ecolines.....	63 B3
Old Castle Port.....	64 B5
Scandlines.....	(see 30)

4km from the Baltic Sea. The key street axis is the north-south Manto gatvė (north of the river), Tiltų gatvė (for its first 600m south of the river) and Taikos prospektas.

Old Town lies within the 400m south of the river, mostly west of Tiltų gatvė. Most hotels, the train and bus stations and Klaipėda University are north of the river.

Smiltynė, the northern tip of the Curonian Spit, sits 500m off the mouth of the Danė, across the narrow channel which forms the northern end of the Curonian Lagoon.

**MAPS**

Jaņa sēta's *Klaipėda Neringa* map covers Klaipėda's northern beach suburbs, Smiltynė and the Curonian Spit as well as central Klaipėda (1:10,000). Bookshops sell it for 6.25Lt.

**Information****BOOKSHOPS**

**Akademija** (Daukanto gatvė 16) Maps, guidebooks and English-language fiction.

**Baltų Lankų** (☎ 310 717; www.baltos.lankos.lt; Manto gatvė 21) Best bookshop in town with excellent website and Internet access, on top floor of the red-brick and glass-fronted Mega Plaza shopping centre.

**Eurokalbos** (☎ 311 076; Janonio gatvė 4) English-language novels.

**Vaga** (Manto gatvė 9) Maps, travel guides and the *Baltic Times*.

**INTERNET ACCESS**

The tourist office and Baltų Lankų bookshop have a couple of computers for surfing (2Lt per hour).

**LEFT LUGGAGE**

**Bus station** (Bagazinė; Priestočio gatvė; ☎ 7.30-11.30am & 12.30-8.30pm)

**MEDIA**

**Klaipėda In Your Pocket** (www.inyourpocket.com) Annual city guide published locally and sold in hotels and news kiosks for 5Lt.

**MONEY**

Change cash or withdraw it with Visa/MasterCard at an ATM at these locations:

**Bankas Snoras** (Manto gatvė 9)

**Hansa Bankas** (Turgaus gatvė 9)

**Vilniaus Bankas** (Turgaus gatvė 15) Cashes American Express traveller's cheques.

**POST**

**Post office** (Liepų gatvė 16)

**TOURIST INFORMATION**

**Tourist office** (☎ 412 186; tic@one.lt; Turgaus gatvė 5-7; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat, 10am-2pm Sun Jun-



Aug, 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat May-Sep, 9am-5pm Mon-Fri Oct-Apr) Exceptionally efficient tourist office selling maps and locally published guidebooks. It arranges accommodation and English-speaking guides (50Lt per hour).

#### TRAVEL AGENCIES

**Krantas Travel** (☎ 395 111; www.krantas.lt; Teatro gatvė 5) Kiel and Karlshamn ferry tickets (p354).

**Lithuanian Student & Youth Travel** (☎ 314 672; klaipeda@jaunimas.lt; Janonio gatvė 16) Discounted air, plane and bus tickets.

**Mėja Travel** (☎ 310 295; www.klaipedamejatravel.com; Šimkaus gatvė 21-8) Excursions for cruise-ship passengers and amber fishing.

**West Express** (☎ 310 311; www.westexpress.lt; Daukanto gatvė 20)

#### Sights

##### OLD TOWN

Little of German Klaipėda remains but there are some restored streets in the oldest part of town wedged between the river and Turgaus aikštė. Pretty **Teatro aikštė** (Theatre Sq) is the Old Town focus, dominated by the fine classical-style **Drama Theatre** (1857). Hitler proclaimed the *Anschluss* (incorporation) of Memel into Germany to the crowd on the square from the theatre's balcony.

In front tinkles a fountain dedicated to **Simon Dach**, a Klaipėda-born German poet (1605-59), who was the focus of a circle of Königsberg writers and musicians. On a pedestal in the middle of the water stands **Ännchen von Tharau** (1912), a statue of Ann from Tharau sculpted by Berlin artist Alfred Kune and inspired by a famous German wedding and love song originally written in the East Prussian dialect. The words of the song were originally ascribed to Dach, but it's now thought another Königsberg circle member, the composer Johann Albert, wrote them. The statue and fountain is a replica of the original destroyed during the war.

West of Pilies gatvė are the remains of Klaipėda's old moat-protected **castle**. The **Klaipėda Castle Museum** (Klaipėdos pilies muziejus; ☎ 410 524; www.mlimuziejus.lt; Pilies gatvė 4; adult/child 4/2Lt; ☎ 10am-6pm Wed-Sun Jun-Aug, 10am-6pm Tue-Sat Sep-May) inside the one remaining tower tells the castle's story from the 13th to 17th centuries. To get to the museum, walk through the Klaipėda State Sea Port Authority building and a ship-repair yard. Incredibly, this rundown ramshackle yard is the first thing the 20,000 passengers a year

who step off luxury cruise ships in Klaipėda see! The **cruise ship terminal** (☎ 490 990; www.ports.lt; Pilies gatvė 4) shares the castle site.

Some excellent modern art hangs in the **Klaipėda Art Exhibition Palace** (Klaipėdos Dailės parady rūmai; ☎ 410 412; Aukštoji gatvė 3; adult/child 3/1.50Lt; ☎ noon-6pm Tue-Sun). Next door, **Baroti Gallery** (Baroti galerija; ☎ 313 580; Aukštoji gatvė 3/3) is partly housed in a converted fish warehouse (1819). Its exposed-timber style, called *Fachwerk*, is typical of German Memel.

Around the corner, the **Lithuanian Minor History Museum** (Mažosios lietuvių istorijos muziejus; ☎ 410 524; Didžioji Vandens gatvė 6; adult/child 2/1Lt; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sat) traces the early history of Lithuania Minor. The cute **Blacksmith's Museum** (Kalvystės muziejus; ☎ 410 526; Šzaltkalvių gatvė 2 & 2a; adult/child 2/1Lt; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sat) displays ornate forged-iron works.

##### NORTH OF THE RIVER

A **riverside park** skirts the northern bank of the Danė. Liepų gatvė – home to the **Picture Gallery** (Paveikslų galerija; ☎ 213 319; Liepų gatvė 33; adult/child 4/2Lt; ☎ noon-6pm Tue-Sat, to 5pm Sun) with works by Lithuanian expressionist painter Pranas Domšaitis (1880-1965) – was called Adolf-Hitler-Strasse for a brief spell. **Martynas Mažvydas Sculpture Park** (Liepų gatvė), opposite, was a German cemetery in the 1820s.

All manner of clocks – from Gothic to nuclear – tick inside the **Clock Museum** (Laikrodžių muziejus; ☎ 410 413; Liepų gatvė 12; adult/child 4/2Lt; ☎ noon-6pm Tue-Sat, to 5pm Sun). Carillon concerts are held in its back yard on summer weekends at noon; the 48-bell carillon is in the 44m bell tower of the neighbouring neo-Gothic **post office**.

**Klaipėda University** (☎ 398 900; www.ku.lt; Manto gatvė 84) is magnificent. Founded in 1991, it's located in red-brick 19th-century Prussian military barracks, home to the 3rd Coastal Division when Estonia was part of the USSR.

##### SMILTYNĖ

Smiltynė (Map p348) is a hop, skip and five-minute ferry ride away (p354) across the thin strait that divides Klaipėda from its achingly beautiful coastal sister – the Curonian Spit (p362). This strait-side patch of paradise – packed on summer weekends with Klaipėda residents – has beautiful beaches, sandy dunes and sweet-smelling pine forests.

#### CITY SCAPE

There is no higher spot from which to survey the city than atop the 46.5m tower of Klaipėda's **Mary Queen of Peace Church** (Švč Mergelės Marijos Taikos Karalienės bažnyčia; ☎ 410 120; Rumpiškės gatvė 6a; adult/child 2/1Lt). The enormous concrete church was built in 1957, shut by the Soviet authorities the moment it was complete in 1960 and used as a concert hall until 1988, when the church was reconsecrated and Mass celebrated for the first time. Book a visit through the tourist office.

Equally crowd-pleasing are the sea lion and dolphin shows at the **Lithuanian Sea Museum** (Lietuvos jūrų muziejus; ☎ 490 740; www.juru.muziejus.lt; adult/student 9/5Lt, dolphin/sea lion show 13/3Lt, camera 5Lt; ☎ 10.30am-6.30pm Tue-Sun Jun-Aug, 10.30am-5.30pm Wed-Sun May & Sep; 10.30am-5pm Sat & Sun Oct-Apr), 1.5km from the passenger ferry landing (for Old Castle Port ferries) at the tip of the peninsula. Seals dance on the rocks and sea lions splash around in the moat around the 19th-century fort in which the aquarium is housed.

In July and August horse-drawn carriages (15Lt to 25Lt) ferry tourists from the ferry landing to the museum. Otherwise, it is a lovely waterside stroll past several local sights. The granite boulder at the start of the path honours past winners of the three- and six-nautical-mile races run around Smiltynė on the second Saturday in October. Next port of call is the National Park Visitors Centre (p363) of the Curonian Spit National Park and the **Curonian Spit National**

#### SCULPTURE SCAPE

In true Lithuanian style, Klaipėda is studded with great sculptures, including 120-odd from the late 1970s in the Martynas Mažvydas Sculpture Park (p350) and a monumental 3.5m one in granite of the geezer the park is named after – **Martynas Mažvydas**, author of the first book published in Lithuanian in 1547 – on Lietuvininkų aikštė.

The red granite pillar propping up a broken grey arch of mighty proportions at the southern end of Manto gatvė is Lithuania's biggest granite sculpture. Engraved with the quote 'We are one nation, one land, one Lithuania' by local poet Ieva Simonaitytė (1897-1978), **Arka** (Arch) celebrates Klaipėda joining Lithuania in 1923.

No sculpture grabs you by the throat more than **Farewell** (2002), a heart-tearing statue of a mother with a headscarf, a suitcase in one hand, and the hand of a small boy clutching a teddy bear in the other. It was given by Germany to Klaipėda to remember Germans who said goodbye to their homeland after the city became part of Lithuania in 1923.

**Nature Museum** (Kursių nerijos nacionalinis parkas gamtos muziejus ekspozicija; ☎ 391 179; Smiltynė plentas 12, 10 & 9; adult/child 2/1Lt; ☎ 11am-6pm Tue-Sun Jun-Aug, 11am-6pm Wed-Sun May & Sep), in three wooden houses, incorporating the birds and mammals, plants and insects, and landscape sections of the museum painted yellow, green and brown.

About 700m further north are **old fishing vessels**, including three Baltic Sea fishing trawlers built in the late 1940s and a 1935 **kurėnas** (a traditional 10.8m flat-bottomed Curonian sailing boat used for fishing). Next door, the **Ethnographic Sea Fishermen's Farmstead**, with its collection of traditional 19th-century buildings (the granary, dwelling house, cellar, cattle shed and so on) proffers a glimpse of traditional fishing life.

#### Activities

Grab your Speedos and hit Smiltynė, where footpaths cut through pine forests across the spit's 1km-wide tip to a bleached-white sandy **beach**. From the ferry landing, walk straight ahead across the car park, then bear left towards Nida; on your right a large sign marks a smooth footpath that leads through pine forest to a women's beach (*Moterų pliažas*; 1km), mixed beach (*ben dras pliažas*; 700m) and men's beach (*Vyrų pliažas*; 900m). Nude or topless bathing is the norm on single-sex beaches.

**Melnrage**, 1km north of Klaipėda, has a pier-clad beach to which city dwellers flock at sunset; **Giruliai Beach** is 1km further north. Buses 6 and 4 respectively link Manto gatvė with both. **Karklė**, another kilometre north, is known for having amber specks washed up on its unusually stony beach after

autumn storms and for the protected **Dutch Cap**, a 24m sea cliff. The tourist office rents bicycles (6/30Lt per hour/day plus €100 deposit) to cycle to the sand.

Winter visitors will like the luxurious spa **Sothys Spa Centras** (☎ 315 063; Mažoji Smilties gatvė 2; ☎ 8am-9pm Mon-Fri, 9am-8pm Sat), where Turkish sauna, pool and masseurs are at hand. The tourist office arranges **ice-fishing**.

## Sleeping

### BUDGET

**Klaipėda Travellers Hostel** (☎ 211 879, 8-685 33104; guestplace@yahoo.com; Butkų Juzės gatvė 7/4; dm/d 34/84Lt; reception ☎ 9am-noon; 📺) This bus-station hostel is small, friendly and eager to please. Two small dorms sleep 12 people and there's one double, a kitchen and free tea, coffee and Internet access. Please take your shoes off when you come in.

**Litinterp Guesthouse** (☎ 410 644; klaipeda@litinterp.lt; Puodžių gatvė 17; s/d/tr 100/160/210Lt, with shared bathroom 80/140/180Lt; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-3pm Sat; 📺) This accommodation agency arranges B&B in/around Klaipėda. The 16 rooms in its own guesthouse are clean and nonsmoking. Light pine furnishings create a fresh contemporary look and breakfast is delivered to your room in a basket.

**Viktorija** (☎ 412 190/88; Šimkaus gatvė 2; s/d/tr/q 45/68/90/96/Lt, d with bathroom 135Lt) Shabby old Viktorija is so horrendously awful it's hard to believe it's really open. But it has to be included for adventurous souls who select accommodation based on 'unforgettable experience' rather than 'comfort' factor. A shower costs 3.50Lt and left luggage at reception costs 1Lt/2Lt per small/big item.

## MIDRANGE

**Prelidija Guesthouse** (☎ 310 077; www.prelidija.com; Kepėjų gatvė 7; s/d from 160/180Lt; 📺) Snug in an Old Town house dating to 1856, this guesthouse – a rare breed in Klaipėda – is charming. Despite its history, rooms are minimalist and modern; each has a single fresh flower in a vase and BBC World on the TV. Breakfast costs an extra 17Lt.

**Hotel Klaipėda** (☎ 404 372; www.klaipedahotel.lt; Naujoji Sodo gatvė 1; s/d/ste/apt from 280/300/450/1000Lt; 📺) 'Big, friendly and perfectly equipped' boasts the city's landmark 12-storey former Intourist hotel – a magnificent 210-room red-brick monstrosity squatting north of the Danė River. Renovations lend

the four-star hotel a contemporary boost; the top-floor XII restaurant (open noon to 3am) is a panoramic treat; and its stylish swimming pool with vast flat-screen TV is almost worth the 40Lt it costs per dip.

**Prūsija** (☎ 412 081; Šimkaus gatvė 6; d/tw/apt 160/200/240Lt) This bizarre place with an eclectic bunch of gilded mirrors on the walls, 11 rooms and a restaurant serving Caucasian food is – despite its age and odd manner – an inoffensive budget choice. Staff don't speak English but do smile ferociously.

## TOP END

**Navalis** (☎ 404 200; www.navalis.lt; Manto gatvė 23; s/d/ste/apt 380/414/650/800Lt; 📺) The architectural appeal of this fashionably industrial four-star pad is outstanding. In an old red-brick town house dating to 1863, Navalis – Latin for 'naval' – has a lobby large enough to moor a ship, vast rooms dressed in beech or mahogany furniture and a restaurant of sublime standing.

**Europa Royale** (☎ 404 444; www.europaroyale.com; Teatro gatvė 1; d/ste from €115/220; 📺) Slick sliding doors set the tone for this oasis of elegance overlooking Klaipėda's prettiest square. Rooms are refined.

**Radisson SAS Klaipėda** (☎ 490 800; www.radisson.com; Šaulių gatvė 28; s/d/ste from €100/110/235; 📺) Being geared towards business travellers, this international-standard hotel is cheaper at weekends when the suits go home. Other plus points include a three-hour express laundry service and superduper breakfast buffet.

## THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

**Kurpiai** (☎ 410 555; Kurpių gatvė 1a; meals 35-60Lt; ☎ noon-3am) It's quite incredible really: this Old Town jazz club with cobbled terrace and dark old-world interior has been around for years, opening way before the postindependence bars and restaurants mushroomed. Yet it is not just the best place to eat in Klaipėda, but one of Lithuania's best bars too. (Hell no – it's the best.) A Klaipėda legend, not least because of 'Lithuanian Louis Armstrong' Kango and his amazing sax life, Kurpiai is the spot to come for funky live jazz nightly while sampling tender, juicy steaks and fish dishes. It heaves at weekends so get in well before 9.30pm.

## Eating

**Anikės Teatras** (☎ 314 471; Sukilėlių gatvė 8-10; meals 20-40Lt) Just about the only restaurant with a theatre truly plump on Teatro aikštė, this theatrical dining spot with lavish interior is a Klaipėda must-dine. European is served in the *teatras*; Lithuanian in the adjoining *kuršiai*.

**Čili Kaimas** (☎ 310 953; Manto gatvė 11; meals 15Lt) A chain it might be, but Čili Kaimas deserves recognition on two counts: (a) for its smoked ears, potato pudding and other hearty Lithuanian fodder (b) for its atmospheric setting in a great Soviet-era cinema.

**Forto Dvaras** (☎ 300 211; Naujoji sodo gatvė 1; meals 20Lt) Another rustic choice: think thatched roof, painted wood and a chef who cooks like Grandma did years ago.

**Scandal** (Skandalas; ☎ 411 585; Kanto gatvė 44; meals 40Lt) Scandal is a brash American dream, part Wild West, part Mae West, where charcoal-grilled steaks are as big as states. The spare ribs and brownies are legendary.

**Bambola Pizza** (☎ 312 213; Manto gatvė 1; meals 20Lt) An eatery Klaipėda is famed for in Lithuania, Bambola is a fantastic pizzeria touting over 40 different *picas*, a retro brick interior and busy street terrace.

**Boogie Woogie** (☎ 411 844; Manto gatvė 5; meals 30Lt) This hugely popular but by no means spectacular food factory serves American and European fodder amid pop memorabilia set to get guests tapping their toes.

**Senoji Hansa** (☎ 400 056; Kurpių gatvė 1; meals 12-20Lt) This café sits wedged on a wooden decking terrace in the middle of a cobbled street with enviable Theatre Sq view. At 9.50Lt, the chef's lunchtime dish of the day is a gastronomic steal.

**Pėda** (☎ 310 234; Turgaus gatvė 10) A stylish cellar adjoining an art gallery (entrance around the corner), this old-timer is ideal for light evening snacks, sweet-centred *blynėliai* and live jazz at weekends.

Self-caterers should be able to find what they're looking for at **Iki** (Mažvydo alėja 7/11) and **Ikiukas** (Turgaus gatvė) supermarkets.

## Drinking

Old Town boasts several traditional beer bars, including **Žvejų Baras** (Kurpių gatvė 8) and **Glaja** (Kepėjų gatvė 6), which have riverside terraces overlooking **Meridianas** (☎ 310 601; ☎ noon-3am), an old sailing ship turned bar with sails sponsored by Švyturys (p353).

## BEER TALK

Švyturys is the big-brand beer to drink. Brewed in Klaipėda by Lithuania's oldest operating brewery (since 1784), the market leader comes in eight types ranging from the light fresh golden Gintarinis to the old-style unfiltered Baltas (shake before opening) and the strong, dark, amber-coloured Baltijos.

Danish beer giant Carlsberg Breweries bought a controlling stake in Švyturys in 1999 and four years later scooped Utenos (p323) into its corporate fold, managing the two breweries under controlling company Baltic Beverages Holding (p36).

Tours of Klaipėda's **Švyturys brewery** (www.svyturys.lt), rebuilt after WWII, are organised by the tourist office; 1½-hour tours cost 40Lt per person and depart at noon Wednesday and Friday. Reservations are essential.

**Memelis** (☎ 403 040; www.memelis.lt; Žvejų gatvė 4) This red-brick brewery-restaurant by the river has been in operation since 1871. Interior is old-style beer hall; outside is industrial-feel riverside terrace.

**Black Cat Pub** (Juodojo Katino Smuklė; ☎ 411 167; Mažvydo alėja 1) Cushioned wicker chairs beneath trees make the Black Cat Pub a nice bar to drink at away from traffic fumes. Look for the Guinness sign and feline outside.

**Onyx** (☎ 411 995; Manto gatvė 4) A spiral staircase whirls trendy young punters up to mezzanine seating at this chic café with flat-screen TV and an overdose of steel. With no terrace to speak of, it's very much a winter hang-out.

## Entertainment

The **Organ Summer Festival** in July and August brings organ concerts to the **Klaipėda University Concert Hall** (Donelaičio gatvė 4; tickets 10Lt). Kurpiai (p352) tops the live-jazz bill.

## CINEMA

Watch a movie in English at the **Žemaitija Cinema** (☎ 400 514, 314 090; www.zemaitijoskinas.lt; Manto gatvė 31).

## NIGHTCLUBS

**Elcalor** (☎ 256 186; www.eclalor.lt; Kepėjų gatvė 10; admission before/after 11pm 15/25Lt) With purpled-out windows, Elcalor in Old Town (entrance on

Jono gatvė) is Klaipėda's Latin soul. Bands play on Friday and DJs mix Latin, Latin pop and Latin House on Saturday. Entrance (over 21s) includes a free drink.

**Honolulu** (☎ 404 372; www.honolulu.lt; Naujoji Sodo gatvė 1) A kitsch neon-flashing palm tree sets the tone of this Hawaiian-inspired nightclub, in the basement of Hotel Klaipėda.

## THEATRE

The curtain closes on mainstream plays at the **Drama Theatre** (Dramos teatras; ☎ 314 453; Teatro aikštė 2), and the Klaipėda Philharmonic plays at the **Musical Theatre** (Muzikinis teatras; ☎ 397 402; www.muzikinis-teatras.lt; Danės gatvė 19).

## Shopping

Stalls selling amber souvenirs dot Teatro aikštė.

**Smelio Krantas** (☎ 315 110; Žvejų gatvė 4) For quality linen, amber, books and art.

**Parko Gallery** (☎ 310 501; park.gallery@takas.lt; Turgaus gatvė 9) One of the gallery highlights on Turgaus gatvė. It has contemporary paintings, sculptures and etchings.

**Art Gallery Pėda** (☎ 310 234; Vežejų gatvė) Has designs by contemporary jeweller Jurga Karčiauskaitė-Lago.

## Getting There & Away

### BOAT

From Klaipėda's **International Ferry Port** (Klaipėdos Nafta; ☎ 395 050; www.spk.lt; Perkėlos gatvė 10), **Scandlines** (☎ 310 561; www.scandlines.lt; Naujoji Sodo gatvė 1) sails to/from Kiel (Germany), Aarhus and Aabenraa (Denmark); and **Lisco Lines** (☎ 395 050; www.lisco.lt; Perkėlos gatvė 10) at the port runs passenger ferries to/from Kiel and Sassnitz (Germany), Karlshamn (Sweden) and Gdansk (Poland). For details on schedules and fares, see p400.

### BUS

**Ecolines** (☎ 310 103; www.ecolines.lt; Mažvydo alėja 1; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat) sells tickets for international destinations (p396).

At the **bus station** (☎ 411 547; Priestočio gatvė) the **information window** (☎ 4.30am-noon & 1-10.30pm) has timetable information. Most buses and minibuses to/from Juodkrantė and Nida depart from the ferry landing at Smiltynė on the Curonian Spit.

Services to/from Klaipėda bus station include the following:

**Kaunas** 34Lt, 10 hours, 10 buses daily.

**Kretinga** 3.20Lt, 1¼ hours, half-hourly between 6.25am and 9.30pm.

**Liepāja** 13Lt, 2¼ hours, four buses daily.

**Nida** 8Lt, 1½ hours, two buses daily from the bus station, plus minibuses every half-hour from Smiltynė.

**Palanga** 2.50Lt to 3.50Lt, 45 minutes, at least half-hourly between 4.15am and 11.35pm.

**Pärnu** 65Lt, eight hours, three overnight buses weekly.

**Riga** 41Lt, six to seven hours, two buses daily (one via Liepāja and Palanga).

**Šiauliai** 23Lt, 2½ hours, six buses daily.

**Tallinn** 82Lt, 10 hours, three overnight buses weekly.

**Vilnius** 44Lt, six hours, around 14 buses daily.

### TRAIN

The **train station** (☎ 313 677; Priestočio gatvė 1), 150m from the bus station, has an unusual helmeted clock tower and a moving sculpture (p351) in front.

Daily services include three trains to/from Vilnius (40Lt, five to nine hours), one via Kaunas (25Lt, six hours); six trains to/from Šiauliai (16.50Lt, two to three hours) and Kretinga (3Lt, 20 to 30 minutes).

## Getting Around

### BOAT

Everything about **Smiltynė ferries** (Smiltynės perkėla; 24hr information line ☎ 311 117; www.keltas.lt) – timetables, fares, news flashes – is online. Smoking on ferries is forbidden.

The passenger ferry for Smiltynė leaves from **Old Castle Port** (Senoji perkėla; ☎ 314 257; Žvejų gatvė 8). It docks on the eastern side of Smiltynė, at the start of the Nida road. Ferries sail at least every half-hour between 6.30am and 2.15am June to August (at least hourly until 2am the rest of the year). The crossing takes 10 minutes and a return passenger fare is 1.50Lt/0.75Lt per adult/child, and 2Lt for a bicycle; children under seven sail for free. Except between 9.30am and 7.30pm daily in July and August when it is reserved for foot passengers and cyclists only, motorists can also use Old Castle Port ferries. The return fare for car and passengers is 32Lt.

Year-round, vehicles can use the **New River Port** (Naujoji perkėla; ☎ 310 974; Nemuno gatvė 8), 3km south of the mouth of the Danė River. Ferries sail half-hourly from 6.50am to 8.30pm Monday to Friday, and 7.30am to 9.30pm Saturday and Sunday (hourly in winter). On the Curonian Spit this ferry docks 2.5km south of the Smiltynė ferry landing.

Bus 1 links Klaipėda city centre with the New River Port; in summer an **electric tourist train** (adult/7-10yr 1/0.50Lt) ferries passengers from the New River Port (the train boards the ferry) to the Lithuanian Sea Museum in Smiltynė.

### BUS

Buy tickets for local buses from news kiosks for 0.80Lt or from the driver for 1Lt. Bus 8 (known for pickpockets) links the train station with Manto gatvė, the city centre and the Turgaus stop, on Taikos prospektas. Bus 11 links the bus station with Manto gatvė. Minibuses follow the same route, can be flagged down on the street and cost 1.50Lt/2Lt before/after 11pm; pay the driver.

## PALANGA

☎ 460 / pop 19,550

Palanga is a seaside resort with a split personality – peaceful pensioner paradise in winter, pounding party spot in summer. Tourists from all over Lithuania and abroad flock to its idyllic 10km sandy beach backed by sand dunes and scented pines.

You'll find Palanga, if you don't hear it first, 25km north of Klaipėda and 18km south of the Latvian border. Blink and you'll miss another hotel or bar opening. Yet despite the crowds and encroaching neon Palanga retains its traditional charm with wooden houses and the ting-a-ling of bicycle bells and pedal-powered taxis adding a quaint air to red-brick Basanavičiaus gatvė – the pedestrian heart of the action.

Brash **Šventoji**, 12km north, lacks the panache of Palanga but – with its inflatable fish that spit out kids, dodgem cars and merry-go-round of restaurant entertainers and fun-fair rides – it entertains. **Nemirseta**, a couple of kilometres south of Palanga, is known for its incredible sand dunes and for being the furthest east the Prussians ever got.

## History

Lying on what was for centuries a stretch of Lithuanian Coast, between German territory to the south and German- or Polish-dominated territory to the north, Palanga has often been Lithuania's only port – or potential port, for it was destroyed by the Swedish in 1710. It was a resort in the 19th century, and a Soviet hot spot. After 1991,

villas and holiday homes nationalised under the Soviets were slowly returned to their original owners, and family-run hotels and restaurants opened. In 2005 the city's main pedestrian street had a face-lift befitting the sparkling reputation Palanga now enjoys.

## Orientation

Vytauto gatvė runs parallel to the coast about 1km inland; the tourist office and bus station are a few steps east at Kretingos gatvė. Busy Basanavičiaus gatvė – pedestrian-only between 11am and midnight in summer and lined with bars and restaurants – heads west from amber stalls at its eastern end to Palanga's famous pier on the sea. Klaipėdos plentas, the main road between Klaipėda and the Latvian border, skirts the town to the east.

### MAPS

Jāņa sēta's *Palanga* town plan (1:15,000), featuring Palanga and Šventoji, costs 6.25Lt.

## Information

### INTERNET ACCESS

**Laukinių Vakarų Salūnas** (☎ 52 831; Basanavičiaus gatvė 16; per hr 3Lt; ☎ 8am-6am) Saloon bar with Internet room.

### EMERGENCY

**Police station** (☎ 53 837; Vytauto gatvė 4)

### MEDICAL SERVICES

**Gintarinė vaistinė** (www.gintarine.lt; Vytauto gatvė 49; ☎ 9am-9pm)

**Palangos vaistinė** (Vytauto gatvė 33; ☎ 9am-8pm) Pharmacy in the former KGB headquarters (1944–51).

### MONEY

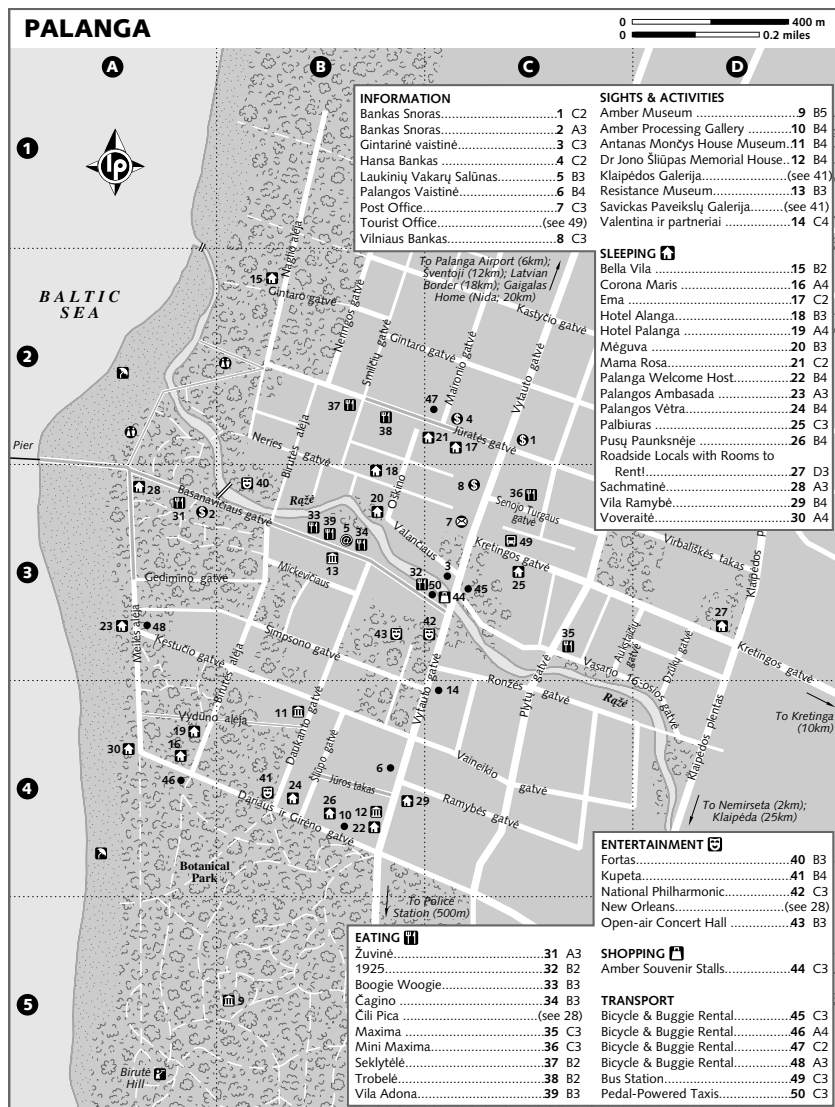
**Bankas Snoras** Basanavičiaus (Basanavičiaus gatvė; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-8pm Mon-Sat, 9am-6pm Sun); Jūratės (cnr Vytauto & Jūratės gatvė; ☎ 11am-8pm Mon-Sat, to 5pm Sun) Blue booths with currency exchange and ATM. **Hansa Bankas** (Jūratės gatvė 15) **Vilniaus Bankas** (Vytauto gatvė 61)

### POST

**Post office** (Vytauto gatvė 53)

### TOURISM INFORMATION

**Tourist office** (☎ 48 811, 8-606 05083; www.palangait.lt; Kretingos gatvė 1; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat & Sun, until 3.30pm Sat & Sun Sep-May) Books accommodation and sells maps and guides; at Palanga bus station.



## Sights & Activities

A stroll along **Basanavičiaus gatvė** is a sight in itself – and the way most holiday-makers pass dusky evenings. Stalls selling amber straddle the eastern end and amusements dot its entire length – inflatable slides, bungee-jump simulators, merry-go-rounds, electric cars, portrait art-

ists, buskers, and street performers with monkeys. A discordant note amid all this party madness is struck by the small photographic display inside the **Resistance Museum** (Basanavičiaus gatvė 19; ☎ 3-5pm Wed, Sat & Sun).

From the end of Basanavičiaus gatvė, a boardwalk leads across the dunes to the **pier**. The original wooden pier dated to

1888. By day, street vendors sell popcorn, *ledai* (ice cream), *dešrainiai* (hot dogs), *alus* and *gira* here. At sunset (around 10pm in July) families and lovers gather here on the sea-facing benches to watch the sunset.

From the pier end of Basanavičiaus, a walking and cycling path wends north and south through pine forest. Skinny paths cut west onto the sandy **beach** at several points and, if you follow the main path (Meilės alėja) south onto Darius ir Girėno gatvė, you reach the **Botanical Park** where cycling and walking tracks are rife. Fascinating B&W photos of old Palanga fill the **Dr Jono Šliūpas Memorial House** (Jono Šliūpo memorialinė sodyba; ☎ 54 559; Vytauto gatvė 23a; adult/child 2/1Lt; ☎ 11am-5pm Tue-Sun).

Contemporary artworks are showcased at **Klaipėdos Galerija** (☎ 410 401; Daukanto gatvė 24; ☎ 2-7pm) and **Savickas Paveikslų Galerija** (☎ 8-685 62637; Daukanto gatvė 24), a twinset of galleries in an interior courtyard. The **Antanas Mončys House Museum** (Antonio Mančio namai muzejus; ☎ 49 366; Daukanto gatvė 16; adult/child 2/1Lt; ☎ noon-5pm Tue, to 7pm Wed-Sun) displays sculptures, collages and masks by Lithuanian émigré artist Antanas Mončys (1921–93).

## BOTANICAL PARK & AMBER MUSEUM

Lush greenery and swans gliding on still lakes make Palanga's Botanical Park a haven of peace after the frenetic-paced beach and town centre. The 1-sq-km park includes a rose garden, 18km of footpaths and **Birutė Hill** (Birutės kalnas), once a pagan shrine. According to legend, it was tended by vestal virgins, one of whom, Birutė, was kidnapped and married by Grand Duke Kęstutis. A 19th-century chapel tops the hill.

## A WACKY TRIP TO NIDA, LATVIA

Wackier than wacky is the Gaigalas family home, a crumbling homestead – a stone's throw from the sea – with a garden decorated solely from trash washed up on the 3.5km stretch of beach in front. Life rings, 'women only' signs from the beach, toothbrushes, hard hats, fishing nets, driftwood, buoys by the barrow load: you name it, it's strung on the branch of a tree, studded on a bush or retooled as a sculpture. Carefully wrapped in plastic are 25 letters washed up in bottles since 1995.

Totally ridiculous it might seem, but a visit here is a unique opportunity to peek into a local home and see how far too many people in these tough postindependent climes live: water is from a well, the only sink is beneath the stars and Birutė's only real income in the past 10 years has been from the odd camper she lets camp in her field and the 15kg of amber specks she's found on the beach after autumn storms.

Find the Gaigalas home in pinprick Nida, 20km north of Palanga and 2km north of the Lithuanian border in Latvia. After crossing, turn left after 200m down a mud track signposted Nida and follow it for 4km. All donations welcome: look for the orange buoy with the money-box slit.

The highlight is the **Amber Museum** (Gintaro muzejus; ☎ 51 319, 53 501; Vytauto gatvė 17; adult/child 5/2.50Lt; ☎ 10am-8pm Tue-Sat, to 7pm Sun), inside a sweeping classical palace (1897). The museum showcases 20,000-odd examples of Baltic gold (p35).

## AMBER PROCESSING GALLERY

A key stop on Lithuania's Baltic Amber Road (p282) is an old barn that has been renovated and painted yellow to become an amber workshop. In the 17th century there were a dozen or so such workshops, which today's **Amber Processing Gallery** (Gintaro dirbtuvės galerija; ☎ 8-652 36719; Vytauto gatvė 21; admission free; ☎ 10am-8pm May-Sep), run by the Palanga guild of amber masters, emulates. In the late 1880s Palanga was one of the largest amber-processing centres in the Baltics, its amber products being transported to Russia then mailed on to the Caucasus, Germany and France. A gallery sells finished amber pieces (jewellery, sculptures, chessboards etc), as does upmarket amber jeweller **Valentina ir partneriai** (☎ 51 386; Vytauto gatvė 66; ☎ 10am-6pm).

## KRETINGA

This winter garden has seen better days but the green-fingered might still enjoy the tropical mirage of 850 species of exotic plants blooming forth in a tatty classical glasshouse at the **Kretinga Museum** (Kretingos muzejus; ☎ 445-53 505; Vilniaus gatvė 20; adult/student 3/1Lt; museum ☎ 10am-6pm Mon, 9am-8.30pm Tue-Sun, café ☎ noon-11pm), 10km east in Kretinga. The hot house opened in 1875 in one of the many homes of the Tyszkiewicz family of Polish nobles, but

### THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

**Hotel Palanga** (☎ 41 414; www.palanga.hotel.lt; Birutės alėja 60; d 500-800Lt, 1-/2-room apt 1200/1600Lt; ☑ ☒ ☓ ☔ ☕ ☖) A breathtaking vision of glass and wood wrapped inside 80-year-old pine trees, this chic hotel was built from new – lopping down just three trees in the process. The result is stunning: rooms peer out on blue sky and tree trunk, treetop or sea (in the case of the top floor), while furnishings are subtle, luxurious, with natural hues of amber, cream and sand predominating. The outdoor pool is a sparkling expanse of blue between trees while the sauna complex (free to hotel guests between 8am and noon; 200Lt per hour at other times) is, as the hotel bumf phrases it, ‘an oasis for body and soul’. Best of all, the imaginative souls behind Palanga’s swishest project to date are all set to open a three-star counterpart on the same street very soon. Call Hotel Palanga for an update.

a fire devastated it in 1915 and in 1940 the Soviet Army destroyed it.

### Festivals & Events

The summer season opens on the first Saturday of June and closes with a massive street carnival, song festival and pop concert on the last Saturday in August. Summer is one long merry-go-round of music concerts of all genres.

The three-day **Palanga Seals** (Palangos ruoniai) festival in mid-February sees thousands of hardy swimmers frolic and squeal in the freezing waters of the Baltic Sea.

### Sleeping

Prices listed are for the high season (June to September) when everything gets booked up fast; winter sees rates slashed by up to 50%.

**Palanga Welcome Host** (☎ 48 723; www.palanga.welcomelost.lt; Vytauto gatvė 21) is an association of 150 private homes with self-catering rooms, apartments and villas to rent.

### BUDGET

Try haggling with one of the many locals who stand at the eastern end of Kretingos gatvė touting ‘Nuomojami kambariai’ (rooms for rent) signs. Most houses on Neries gatvė and Birutės alėja tout the same sign. Count on

paying 25Lt to 100Lt a night, room quality and facilities depending. Alternatively, contact room-rental agency **Palbiuras** (☎ 51 500, 8-675 37222; www.palbiuras.lt; Kretingos gatvė 12) or Lit-interp Guesthouse (p352) in Klaipėda.

**Voveraitė** (☎ 52 532; 8-699 88808; voveraitė24@one.lt; Meilės alėja 24; d 120-350Lt) Find these ‘excellent luxury rooms’ wedged between a café and the beach. Jacuzzi-clad rooms on the top floor can apparently view the sea.

**Ema** (☎ 48 608; www.ema.lt; Jūratis gatvė 32; s/d 60/100Lt) Blue, pink, green, yellow – there is a wall for every colour at this basic but bold guesthouse. A cactus marks the spot.

**Mėguva** (☎ 48 839; Valančiaus gatvė 1; s/d/tr 60/120/75Lt) Tucked behind Palanga’s red-brick church, this old Soviet block touts three sets of seasonally adjusted prices and a clutch of rooms sporting varying degrees of renovation. Triples with shared bathroom remain rock bottom.

### MIDRANGE

**Vila Ramybė** (☎ 54 124; www.vilaramybe.lt; Vytauto gatvė 54; d 80-200Lt) It is tricky to snag a room at this stylish, unpretentious standout. This 1920s wooden villa is the pick of the crop as far as Vilnius trendies are concerned. Pine-clad rooms come in soothing pastel hues of blues and greens, seven of the 12 have a terrace and most have a little lounge. Its terrace restaurant is equally hip.

**Hotel Alanga** (☎ 49 215; www.alanga.lt; Neries gatvė 14; d/ste 160/390Lt, apt with/without kitchen 270/250Lt; ☑ ☒) This family-friendly hotel might not be the most fashionable, but its rooms are attractive, spotlessly clean and comfortable, and unbeatable value for money. They also have balconies and heated towel rails. Breakfast/parking costs an extra 20Lt/15Lt and a hotel nanny cares for kids for 5Lt per hour.

**Bella Vila** (☎ 26 815; www.bellevila.lt; Gintaro gatvė 1a; d/apt €50-150; ☑) Beautiful Villa is superbly placed in pine forest. Favoured by sports enthusiasts, it rents canoes (15Lt per hour), arranges wind- and kitesurfing, and has a sauna. The 12 basic but comfortable rooms are kitchenette-equipped.

**Palangos Ambasada** (☎ 8-698 08333; www.palangosambasada.lt; Meilės alėja 16; d 160Lt; ☑) This quiet villa backing onto dunes is the closest you’ll get to the beach. Half of its dozen spacious rooms face the water but room 21 is the only one to boast a Real McCoy

sea view. Breakfast is DIY with the aid of a fridge, kettle and crockery in each room.

**Corona Maris** (☎ 51 329; www.coronamaris.lt; Darius girėno gatvė 5; d/apt 220/350Lt; ☑) With cottages and apartments rather than hotel rooms, this smart modern guesthouse is worth noting. Built from red brick, glass and wood, it is a striking complex framed by well-tended lawns. Doubles have microwave and fridge; apartments have proper kitchens. Guests can rent bikes for 5Lt per hour.

**Palangos Vėtra** (☎ 53 032; www.vetra.lt; Daukanto gatvė 35; s/d 270/320Lt; ☑ ☒ ☓ ☔ ☕ ☖) An oasis of Scandinavian glass and wood, Palangos Vėtra accommodates every need. Standouts include an ATM in the lobby, the quick-service coffee bar and the inflatable slide set up on the green lawn opposite in summer. The hotel pool, sauna, Jacuzzi and steam bath are free to guests between 8am and 10am; otherwise pay 100Lt per hour.

### TOP END

**Sachmatinė** (☎ 51 655; www.sachmatine.lt; Basanavičiaus gatvė 45; d 190-600Lt, tr 330-450Lt; ☑) Pride of place party- and location-wise, this trendy design hotel is near the pier. But don’t expect peace; its 11 stylish rooms are above a busy pizza joint and nightclub.

**Mama Rosa** (☎ 48 581; www.mamarosa.lt; Jūratis gatvė 28a; s/d from 220/395Lt; ☑ ☒) The height of romance, Mama Rosa has eight sweet rooms, each cosily clad English-style with fireplace, trouser press and heated bathroom floor. There is a stylish lounge, sauna complex (150Lt per hour) and Jacuzzi (75Lt per hour) for guests.

**Pusų Paunksneje** (☎ 49 080; www.pusupaunksneje.lt; Darius girėno gatvė 25; d ☑ ☒ ☓ ☔ ☕ ☖) Lithuanian basketball fans, watch out! This beautiful wooden tavern, arranged around a courtyard big enough to host a full-sized tennis court on ground level and a subterranean car park below, feels as giant as its owner – basketball hero Arvydas Sabonis.

### Eating

The focus is on Basanavičiaus gatvė, where the good, bad and ugly line up for a parade of kitsch dining, flaunting everything from fake Hawaiian sunshades to Wild West taverns. From 7pm until midnight, bands blast out cheesy Lithuanian and Russian pop tunes on practically every restaurant terrace.

Those seeking peace – not to mention style – should head for the outside terrace restaurant of aching cool Vila Ramybė (p358) or Pusų Paunksneje (p359); pay from 35Lt per head.

Opening hours listed below are for high season; many places don’t open in winter.

**1925** (☎ 52 526; Basanavičiaus gatvė 4; meals 25Lt) Sunk down from Basanavičiaus, this old wooden house provides relief from the main-street madness. Cuisine is simple and its back garden with church view is the least Disneylike you’ll find.

**Vila Adona** (☎ 40 313; Basanavičiaus gatvė 24; meals 20-50Lt; ☕ 9-3am) Vast manicured terrace gardens front this majestic villa, draped in flower boxes. Service is slick (earpieces ensure waiters stay in touch with the kitchen) and a menu in full colour suits every gastronomic mood. Breakfast is served until 11am.

**Boogie Woogie** (☎ 30 413; Basanavičiaus gatvė 28; meals 20-50Lt; ☕ 10am-2am Sun-Thu, to 3am Fri & Sat) Interior designers adopted a definite Disney approach at this enormous tavern with elaborate water garden out back. Cuisine is Lithuanian with a generous pinch of European.

**Čili Pica** (☎ 8-686 23355; Basanavičiaus gatvė 45; 20/50cm pizza from 9/45Lt; ☕ 8am-2am Mon-Thu, to 6am Fri & Sat) This pizzeria is the face of Palanga, with its mixed crowd of kid-clad couples, noisy families and young beauties out to party. Find it propped up on candyfloss-pink pillars. Pizzas come in 53 varieties.

On the main street, **Žuvinė** (☎ 53 555; Basanavičiaus gatvė 37a; meals 20-50Lt) cooks up fish and **Čagino** (☎ 53 555; Basanavičiaus gatvė 14; meals 20-50Lt; ☕ 10am-midnight), Russian cuisine, both behind striking glass façades.

Away from the main street:

**Seklytėlė** (☎ 57 415; Jūratis gatvė 18; meals 20Lt) This delightful wooden house is painted a cheery canary yellow and cooks up homemade Lithuanian food in a quaint flowery garden. Granny-knitted rugs are provided for nippier evenings.

**Trobelė** (Jūratis gatvė; meals 20Lt) Drinkers and diners soak up a beer-garden atmosphere at this informal restaurant where kids run riot on swings, slides and cars while grown-ups munch smoked pigs’ ears, boiled pig’s leg and the Lithuanian like.

Self caterers should check out **Maxima** (Plytų gatvė 9) and **Mini Maxima** (Senjoji Turgaus gatvė 1) supermarkets.

## Entertainment

The tourist office knows what's on where. Watch out for posters outside the **National Philharmonic** (Nacionalinė filharmonija; Vytauto gatvė 45) and nearby **Open-air Concert Hall** (Vasaros koncertų salė; ☎ 52 210; Vytauto gatvė 43).

**Kupeta** (Daukanto gatvė 24) For live jazz, folk and blues, try this hip jazz club.

**Vila Aldona** (p359), **Fortas** (☎ 51 555; Neries gatvė 39; admission 15Lt) and **New Orleans** (☎ 48 296; Basanavičiaus gatvė 45) are nightclubs.

## Getting There & Away

Reach Palanga by road or air; services are substantially more frequent in summer.

### AIR

**Palanga Airport** (☎ 52 020; www.palanga-airport.lt; Liepojos plentas 1), 6km north of the centre, is served by a once-weekly Lithuanian Airlines flight to/from Vilnius.

Air Lithuania handles international flights to Hamburg, Oslo, Billund (Denmark), Munich, Cologne and Moscow. SAS, Air Baltic, Avitrans and Palanga-based Amber Air all fly to/from Copenhagen. For more details, see p393.

**Amber Air** (☎ 56 338; www.amberair.lt) and **Air Lithuania** (☎ 53 431) have an airport office.

### BUS

Services at the tiny **bus station** (☎ 53 333; Kretingos gatvė 1):

**Kaunas** 36Lt, 3½ hours, about 11 buses daily.

**Klaipėda** 2.50Lt to 3.50Lt, 45 minutes, at least half-hourly between 4.15am and 11.35pm.

**Riga** (via Liepāja) 40Lt, five hours, three buses weekly.

**Šiauliai** 22Lt, 2½ hours, about 10 daily via Panevėžys and Plungė.

**Vilnius** 47Lt, six hours, about nine daily.

## Getting Around

Bus 2 runs to/from the airport, roughly every hour from 6am to 10pm. Timetables are posted at its town centre stop on Požėlos gatvė behind the bus station.

The main taxi stand is on Kretingos gatvė in front of the bus station; a taxi from the airport into town costs 20Lt.

Pedal-powered taxis (☎ 8-606 55928) are at the eastern end of Basanavičiaus gatvė. May to September, bicycle-hire stalls pepper the town. Hourly rates are 6Lt for a bicycle, 15Lt/20Lt for a three-/four-wheel buggy for two and 35Lt for a two-kid buggy.

## ŽEMAITIJA NATIONAL PARK

☎ 460 / pop 3500

Head 50km inland from Palanga and you hit this 200-sq-km national park, enshrined in fables of devils, ghosts and buried treasure amid its carpet of fir trees. It's named after the historical region of Samogitia (Žemaitija), and people in this neck of the woods flaunt a fierce sense of ethnic identity. The presence of an underground Soviet

## FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE

Deep in the forests of Žemaitija National Park a secret Soviet underground missile base has been discovered. It once housed mighty nuclear missiles – with enough power to destroy most of Europe. The 22m R12 rockets with 3m warheads were smuggled into the heart of Lithuania so that they were in range of their targets.

This terrifying arsenal lay hidden from the Lithuanian people for at least two decades. The base, a circular underground centre, was flanked by four missile silos, only visible from the ground by their domed tops. The James Bond-style pad, which lies in Plokštinė, just a few kilometres east of the idyllic rural village Plateliai, was equipped with electrical and radio stations, and control rooms. Ten thousand soldiers were secretly drafted in from USSR satellite states to construct the base in 1960, taking eight months to dig out the enormous 25m-deep silos. It was home to the 79th Rocket Regiment until 1978 – when the missiles mysteriously disappeared and the base was left to rot. During its history the base deployed rockets to Cuba during the crisis in September 1962 and was put on red alert during the 1968 Czechoslovakia aggression. The military town, once home to 320 soldiers, stands nearby: travellers can sleep in its barracks (p361).

In summer the base can be visited by **guided tour** (adult/child 4/2Lt; tours ☎ 10am, noon, 2pm, 4pm & 6pm May-Aug); at other times you need to ring Žemaitija National Park HQ (p361) in Plateliai to arrange a tour and/or book an English-speaking guide (30Lt per hour). Tours take you into the heart of the base: you see the control room, heating room, enormous diesel engine used to power the place and, most terrifyingly of all, one of the 27m-deep silos (6m across) where a warhead once stood ready. It is cold underground so bring a warm jumper. Sturdy shoes are also recommended; 30 years of abandonment renders the bat-infested site hazardous. A **3.2km nature trail** leads from the site into the surrounding forest and past the remains of security lines.

By car take the road to Plateliai off the A11 (Kretinga-Šiauliai road), follow signs to Plateliai, then turn right (east) to Plokštinė following the 'Militarizmo Ekspozicija' (Military Exhibition) signs; find the base at the end of the gravel road, 5km from the Plateliai road turn-off. It's impossible to get to without your own wheels.

missile base only adds to the mysterious charm.

**Lake Plateliai** (Platelių ežeras), renowned for its seven islets and seven ancient shore terraces, is the park's most stunning natural feature – the site of midsummer celebrations (p15). Legend says the lake was swept into the sky by a storm before dropping where it lies now after the magic words 'Ale plate lej' (the rain goes wide) were uttered.

Many traditional Samogitian festivals are celebrated in small-town **Plateliai** on its western shore, including the amazingly colourful **Shrove Tuesday Carnival**. See elaborate masks worn during the Shrovetide festivities in the old granary of **Plateliai Manor** (Didžioji gatvė 22).

About 20km northeast is **Samogitian Calvary** (Žemaičių Kalvarija), built on the site of 9th- to 13th-century burial grounds. Pilgrims flock here during the first week of July to climb the seven hills where 20 chapels form a 7km 'Stations of the Cross' route in commemoration of Christ's life, death and resurrection.

**Plungė**, 5km south of the park and the main gateway into it, is of no interest bar

the modern Samogitian art (carvings, metal works, sun crosses) displayed in the **Žemaitija Art Museum** (Žemaičių dailės muziejus; ☎ 54 731; ☎ 10am-5pm Wed-Sun), inside a run-down 19th-century manor house.

## Information

In Plateliai the **national park headquarters** (☎ 49 231; www.zemaitijosnp.lt; Didžioji gatvė 8; ☎ 8am-noon & 12.45-5pm Mon, 8am-7pm Tue-Fri, 8am-5pm Sat) issues fishing permits (1Lt/3Lt per day/month), arranges guides (15Lt to 30Lt an hour), has information on yacht, windsurf and boat hire, and can direct you to the workshops of local folk artists. It also hosts a small exhibition on park flora and fauna.

## Sleeping & Eating

In July and August die-hards can kip the night in the former military barracks: 15Lt gets you a bed (no hot water, no shower, one loo between everyone); the park headquarters can book you in.

Otherwise the park headquarters arranges B&B (around 50Lt per person) in

## GET STONED

A stony silence reigns over 'Lithuania's Stonehenge', as the **Orvydas Farmstead** (adult/child 4/2Lt; ☎ 10am-7pm Tue-Sun) is known. Some say divine intervention was behind the prolific, obsessional carvings and fantastical creations of stonemason Kazys Orvydas (1905-89) and oldest son turned Franciscan monk Vilius (1952-92), which struggle for space today between the weeds that threaten to smother the once well-kept garden.

Originally carved from stone and wood for the village cemetery in Salantai, the collection was hoarded at the Orvydas homestead after Khrushchev's wrath turned on religious objects in the 1960s. But most of the bizarre collection dates to the 1980s, the site being blockaded by the Soviets to prevent visitors getting to the persecuted Orvydas family. A traditional Samogitian roadside cross marks the farmstead entrance, 5km south of Salantai on the road to Plungė.

Stone-lovers heading in the opposite direction can get stoned at the **Museum of Unique Stones** (☎ 76 291; Salantų gatvė 2; adult/child 2/1Lt, museum guide 5.50Lt; ☎ 8am-6pm summer, 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri winter) in Mosėdis, 12km north of Salantai. Ranging from boulders to pebbles labelled with their origin from Scandinavia and the bottom of the Baltic Sea, the eclectic collection of stones spills out around the entire village.

Four daily buses between Klaipėda and Skuodas stop in Salantai and Mosėdis. Buses also run to Salantai and Mosėdis from Plungė. For the Orvydas Garden get off at the last stop before Salantai and walk about 1km.

some fabulous farms and private homes in the park, including the flowery lakeside home of **Marija Striaukienė** (☎ 49 152, 8-698 03485) in the village of Beržoras. In Plateliai, **Morta Mikašauskienė** (☎ 49 117, 8-682 05059; Ežero gatvė 33; 4-bed cottages 160Lt; **P**) rents little wooden houses for four people (160Lt) and has a traditional sauna (80Lt for three hours).

### Getting There & Away

See Klaipėda (p354), Palanga (p342) and Šiauliai (p360) for limited public transport to/from Žemaitija.

### CURONIAN SPIT NATIONAL PARK

☎ 469 / pop 2600

The western Lithuanian scent of ozone and pine is at its headiest on this thin tongue of sand. Waves from the Baltic Sea pound one side, the Curonian Lagoon laps the other. The winds and tree-felling have sculpted the Curonian Spit (Kursių Nerija) over time. But this precious natural treasure is by nature a fragile one – being made up of millions of grains of constantly shifting sand. As the dunes creep closer to the Baltic Sea there are fears it may one day disappear.

In 1991 the Curonian Spit National Park was created to protect the dunes, lagoon and surrounding sea. Lush pine forests filled with deer, elk and wild boar cover 70% of the

#### SPIT RULES

- National park entrance fee: car, driver and passengers 20Lt, bus passenger or foot 3Lt.
- Speed limit: 40km/h in villages, 60km/h or 70km/h on open roads.
- Don't bathe in the lagoon: it's polluted.
- Don't romp in the dunes, pick flowers or stray off designated footpaths.
- Don't damage flora or fauna, mess with bird nests, pitch a tent or light campfires.
- Beware of elks crossing the road.
- Break a rule and risk an on-the-spot fine of up to 300Lt.
- In case of forest fire: Juodkrantė ☎ 8-259 53273, Prėila and Pervalka. ☎ 8-259 55125; Nida ☎ 8-259 52224.
- To alert a lifeguard: ☎ 8-469 52239.

park; the dunes make up 25% of it; and just 1.5% is urban, namely the four traditional villages where fishermen smoke their catch according to an old Curonian recipe. The main industry is tourism, the double-edged sword that yields both its main source of income and biggest environmental threat.

#### SHIFTING SANDS & DELICATE DUNES

Legend has it that motherly sea giantess Neringa created the spit, lovingly carrying armfuls of sand in her apron to form a protected harbour for the local fishing folk. The truth is as enchanting. The waves and winds of the Baltic Sea let sand accumulate in its shallow waters near the coast 5000 or 6000 years ago to create an original beauty found nowhere else.

Massive deforestation in the 16th century started the sands shifting. Trees were felled for timber, leaving the sands free to roam unhindered at the wish of the strong coastal winds. At a pace of 20m a year, the sands swallowed 14 villages in the space of three centuries.

Dubbed the 'Sahara of Lithuania' due to its desert state, drastic action was needed. In 1768 an international commission set about replanting. Today this remains a priority of the national park authorities. Deciduous forest (mainly birch groves) covers 20% of the national park; coniferous forest, primarily pine and mountain pine trees, constitutes a further 53%. Alder trees can be found on 2.6 sq km (3% of the park's area). Lattices of branches and wooden stakes have pinned down the sand.

But the sands are still moving – 5.5m north in 2002 and at least 1m a year since. Slowly the spit is drifting into the Baltic Sea. Each tourist who scrambles and romps on Parnidis Dune – the only remaining free-drifting dune – meanwhile pushes down several tonnes of sand. With 1.5 million people visiting the dunes each year, the threat of people wandering off designated paths – not to mention forest fire – is high.

The dunes are also shrinking. Winds, waves and humans have reduced them by 20m in 40 years. Its precious beauty may yet be lost forever.

The entire Curonian Spit was Prussian territory until WWI. It used to have a hugely magnetic attraction for German exiles who returned to the spot where they once lived to holiday instead, but today dozens of world languages are heard among tourists.

The southern half of the spit belongs to Russia; a road runs the whole length to Kaliningrad (see the Kaliningrad Excursion chapter), in the neighbouring Russian-owned Kaliningrad Region. The main settlement on the Lithuanian side is Nida, a quaint summer resort north of the border, which forms the Neringa administrative district with Juodkrantė, Pervalka and Preila.

### Information

There is a tourist office (www.neringainfo.lt) in Nida (p366) and Juodkrantė (p364), and the national park website (www.nerija.lt) is invaluable. For spit accommodation, surf www.kopos.lt.

**National Park Visitors Centre** Nida (Lankytojų centras; ☎ 51 256; Naglių gatvė 8; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Sat, 9am-2pm Sun May-Sep; Smiltynė ☎ 46-402 257; kinfo@takas.lt; Smiltynės plentas 11; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-4pm Sat, 9am-2pm Sun Jun-Aug, 9am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri Sep-May). Arranges guides (40Lt per hour) and stocks an abundance of information on walking, cycling, boating and lazing activities in the park.

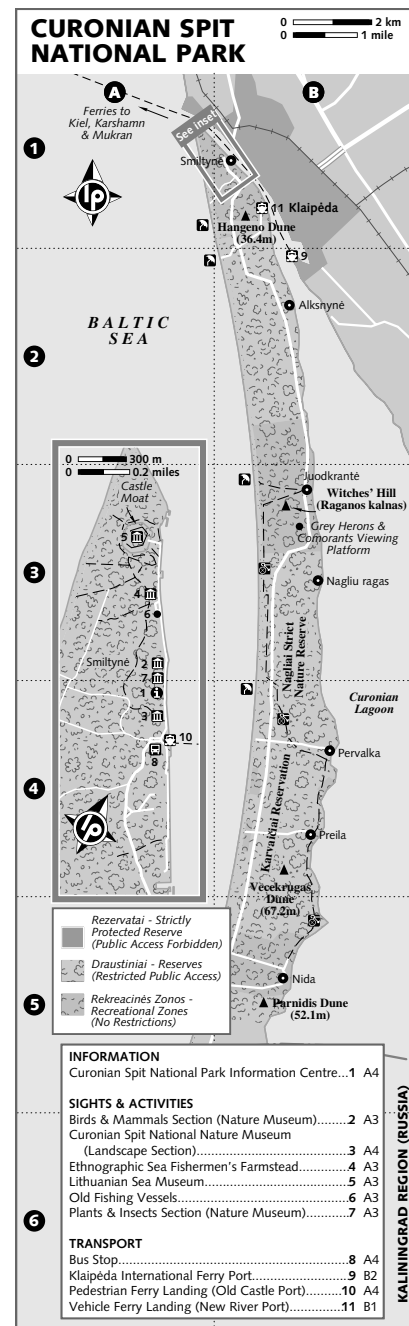
### Festivals & Events

The summer season – early June to the end of August – ushers in the **Summer Extravaganza Neringa** (Vasaros pramojų kolekcijos; ☎ 1588; www.vasaraneringoje.lt), a fiesta of concerts, craft days and cultural events.

### Getting There & Away

The Klaipėda-Smiltynė ferry (see p354) is the main access route. From Smiltynė, minibuses – timed to coincide with ferry arrivals/departures – ply the route to/from Nida via Juodkrantė. Some stop in Pervalka and Preila too; see p370 for details. In low season, team up with fellow Nida-bound travellers in Smiltynė and share a taxi; a fare per person to Nida is around 10Lt, excluding park entrance fee. A daily river boat links the Curonian Spit with Kaunas (p338).

You can also reach Kaliningrad (south) in Russia. The Russian border post is 3km south of Nida on the main road. Don't contemplate this without the necessary Russian visa and paperwork (see p392).



The spit has one **petrol station** (Smiltynės plentas 6) near the Lithuanian-Russian border.

## Juodkrantė

☎ 469 / pop 700

Juodkrantė (Schwarzort to Germans) is 20km south of Smiltynė on the east (lagoon) coast of the spit. Contemporary stone sculptures and a silky-smooth promenade line the water's edge while holiday homes, *žuvis* (fish) outlets, a **post office** (Kalno gatvė 3), pier and bus stop (both opposite Liudviko Rėzos gatvė 8) form the tiny village centre.

The red-brick German **Evangelical-Lutheran church** (Liudviko Rėzos gatvė 56) built in 1885 and a **Weather-vanes Gallery** (Vetrungių galerija; ☎ 53 357; Liudviko Rėzos gatvė 13) selling authentic weather-vanes (p364) mark the village's southern end.

In the woods is **Witches' Hill** (Raganos kalnas), where devils, witches, ghouls and other fantastical and grotesque wooden carvings from Lithuanian folklore skulk along a sculpture trail careering from fairy-tale to nightmare. It's signposted immediately south of Liudviko Rėzos gatvė 46.

At Juodkrantė's northern end there's an area around a fishing harbour known as **Amber Bay** (Gintaro įlanka), recalling the amber excavated in the village in three separate clusters – 2250 tonnes in all – in 1854 to 1855 and 1860. The spit is about 1.5km wide

## SEAFARING WEATHERVANES

Nowhere are Juodkrantė's and Nida's seafaring roots better reflected than on top of the 19th-century wooden cottages that speckle these spit villages.

A ruling in 1844 saw weather-vanes or cocks used to identify fishing vessels. They quickly became ornamentation for rooftops. Originally made from tin and later from wood, these 60cm x 30cm plaques were fastened to the boat mast so other fishermen could see where a *kurėnas* (Neringa boat) had sailed. Each village had its own unique symbol – a black-and-white geometrical design – incorporated in the weathercock and then embellished with an eclectic assortment of mythical cutouts; see the different designs first-hand in the Neringa History Museum (p367). They were an early form of house address.

## THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

**Vila Flora** (☎ 53 024; www.vilafloa.lt; Kalno gatvė 7a; s/d/tr 180/220/250Lt; 📍) Tucked across a green lawn in an attractive rust-and-wine-red building, Vila Flora cooks up the most imaginative cuisine on the spit (meals 30Lt). It bans fries from its menu and stuffs bog-standard Lithuanian *blinyai* (pancakes) with seafood to come up with a dish that is traditional, tasty and – amazingly – found nowhere else. Its chicken filet filled with mozzarella cheese and topped with a curry sauce is equally delicious while its cool covered terrace, equipped with a play bench for kids, keeps the whole family happy. Seventeen stylish rooms upstairs ensure a perfect night's sleep.

at this point and the fine stretch of forest – good for spotting elk in the early morning and evening – is among the loveliest you will find on the peninsula. Fauna and flora abounds along the gorgeous cycling path (p367) linking Juodkrantė with Nida.

## INFORMATION

**Pharmacy** (Liudviko Rėzos gatvė 54; ☎ 9am-1pm & 5-7pm Mon-Fri) Located in Hotel Ažuolynas, which also contains an ATM.

**Tourist office** (☎ 53 490; juodkrante@neringa.lt; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sat May-Sep) Mildly useful and also located in Hotel Ažuolynas.

## SLEEPING

The tourist office has a list of private rooms and flats to rent. A new hotel should be open by the time you read this, in a new wooden house behind Sorrento (p367) near the water's edge.

**Hotel Ažuolynas** (☎ 53 310; www.hotelazuolynas.lt; Liudviko Rėzos gatvė 54; s/d/tr/q Jun-Aug 179/228/399/529, May & Sep 132/170/345/524Lt, Oct-Apr 111/141/294/440Lt; 📍) A stuffed brown bear stands in the lobby of this rambling hotel, laden with facilities: Italian restaurant, billiard hall, minigolf opposite, gift shop, Turkish bath and sauna (150Lt per hour), swimming pool with superduper curly-wurly water slide and tennis courts. Breakfast (22Lt) is not included in high-season (June to August) rates.

**Kurėnas** (☎ 53 101, 8-698 20549; Liudviko Rėzos gatvė 10; d/tr/q 250/270/340Lt; ☎ Apr-Sep) Named after a flat-bottomed Curonian boat, this

busy and bright café-bar with street-side terrace sports seven rooms up top. Some peep onto the lagoon.

## EATING

Eating options are limited and self-caterers should buy everything bar smoked fish (sold at Liudviko Rėzos gatvė 16, 20, 22, 36 and 44) in Klaipėda before arriving.

**Sorrento** (☎ 53 100; www.sorrento.lt; Liudviko Rėzos gatvė 1a) The contemporary kid on the block, this hot sunset-watching spot is a kiss away from the water's edge in a painted wooden villa. Cuisine is upmarket and Italian.

Family-run choices in flower-filled gardens of quaint wooden cottages;

**Pamaris takas** (Liudviko Rėzos gatvė 42; meals 20Lt)  
**Švejoniė** (Liudviko Rėzos gatvė 30; meals 20Lt)

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses to/from Nida (5Lt, 25 minutes) and Smiltynė (3Lt, 30 minutes) stop in Juodkrantė; see p367.

## Juodkrantė To Nida

South of Juodkrantė is Lithuania's largest colony of **grey herons and cormorants**, observed here since the 19th century. Wooden steps lead from the road to a **viewing platform** where the panorama of thousands of nests amid pine trees – not to mention the noise of the

6500-strong colony – is astonishing. Cormorants arrive in early February (herons a little later) to pick and rebuild their nests. By May chicks are screaming for food. Starlings, thrushes, warblers, and grey, spotted and black woodpeckers can also be seen here.

Almost immediately afterwards, the road switches from the eastern side of the peninsula to the western. The 16.8-sq-km **Naglių Strict Nature Reserve** (Naglių rezervatas) here protects the **Dead or Grey Dunes** (named after the greyish flora that covers them) that stretch 8km south and are 2km wide; a marked footpath leads into the reserve from the main road.

Shifting sands in the mid-19th century forced villagers here to flee to **Pervalka** (population 40) and **Preila** (population 200) on the east coast, accessible by side roads from the main road. Pine-forested **Vecekrugas Dune** (67.2m), the peninsula's highest dune, near Preila, stands on a ridge called Old Inn Hill – named after an inn that stood at the foot of the dune before being buried by sand; view it from the Juodkrantė-Nida cycling path (p367).

## Nida

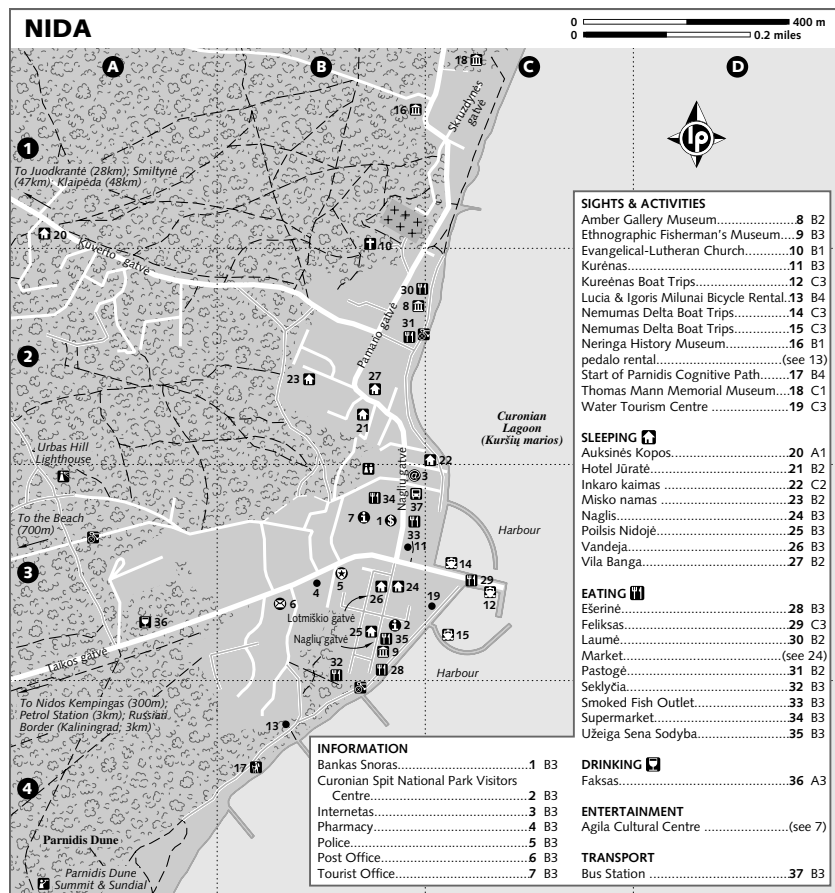
☎ 469 / pop 1500

Lovely Nida is an old-fashioned fishing village bathed in natural beauty. The allure of sparkling lagoon waters, yellow sands, hazy pine forests and wooden cottages with fishing nets strung outside have made it the hub of the spit. Each year 50,000 tourists swamp this tiny village.

Nida (Nidden in German) is the largest settlement on the Lithuanian half of the Curonian Spit, 48km from Klaipėda and 3km from the Russian border. White-sand beaches are a 2km walk away through pine forest, or there's a shuttle bus in summer from pier to beachfront. To the south is the most impressive dune on the peninsula, Parnidis Dune (Parnidžio kopa), which has steps up to its 52m summit from where there are stunning views of rippling, untouched dunes stretching into Russia.

From the late 19th century a colony of mainly East Prussian artists drew inspiration from the area. Nida developed as a tourist resort and there were five hotels by the 1930s, when the German writer Thomas Mann (1875–1955) had a summer home built here. In 1965 French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre and companion Simone de Beauvoir were





granted special permission by Khrushchev to spend five days on the dunes, Lithuanian photographer Antanas Sutkus being allowed to shoot the pair in the sand.

Nida stretches for 2km, but its centre is at the southern end, behind the harbour.

#### INFORMATION

**Bankas Snoras** (Naglių gatvė 27) Currency exchange and ATM opposite the bus station.

**Internetas** (Naglių gatvė 22; per 10/60min 1/5Lt; ☎ 10am-1pm & 3-10pm)

**Pharmacy** (☎ 52 138; Taikos gatvė 11; ☎ 8.30am-8pm Mon-Sat, 9am-3pm Sun May-Sep)

**Police** (☎ 52 202; Taikos gatvė 5)

**Post office** (Taikos gatvė 15)

**Tourist office** (☎ 52 345; agilainfo@is.lt; Taikos gatvė 4;

☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Sat, to 3pm Sun Jun-Aug, 10am-6pm Mon-Fri Sep-May) Sells maps, books accommodation (5Lt) and stocks loads of information (including photographs) of private rooms and flats to rent.

**National Park Visitors Centre** (Lankytojų centras; ☎ 51 256; Naglių gatvė 8; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Sat, 9am-2pm Sun May-Sep)

#### SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Chill out. Go for walks. Relax. During the spring and autumn storms, speckles of amber are washed up on the shores. In the depths of winter the frozen lagoon is dotted with people ice-fishing for smelt and burbot. In summer hire a pedalo (8/15Lt per 30/60 minutes) from the coastal path leading to Parnidis Dune

#### NIDA TO JUODKRANTĖ BY BIKE

An ab fab cycling path wends its way 30km from Nida to Juodkrantė, passing en route some of the spit's greatest natural treasures – Vecekrugas Dune (p365), an authentic fish smoker in Preila (p365) and footpaths leading from the cycling path in Karvaičiai Reservation where entire villages were buried by sand. At Pervalka you can cycle through or around the village (the quicker route), arriving 4km later at the entrance to the Naglių Strict Nature Reserve (p365). Shortly afterwards, the cycling path crosses the main road to take cyclists along the opposite western side of the spit for the remaining 9km to Juodkrantė; the first 5km snake beneath pine trees alongside the main road and the final 4km skirt seaside sand dune. Once you're out of the reserve, leap into the sea for a quick cool down before the last leg – an uphill slog through forested dune to arrive in Juodkrantė behind the village.

To pick up the cycling path in Nida, follow the red-paved cycling track north along the lagoon promenade and after passing Thomas Mann's house up top (left), follow the track left around the corner onto Puvynės gatvė. On the road, turn immediately right and follow it for 3.5km until you see a dirt track forking off left into pine forest: this is the start of the cycling path, complete with 0.0km marker.

At the harbour, opt for a boat trip aboard a handsome replica of a **kurėnas** (☎ 8-689 93335; ☎ Jul & Aug), a traditional 19th-century fishing boat, or sail across the lagoon to the Nemunas Delta. The harbour-facing **Water Tourism Centre** (Vandens turizmo centras; ☎ 8-682 70504; Naglių gatvė 14; ☎ 10am-10pm Jun-Sep) has information on boats to hire, organises trips, arranges bass-fishing expeditions in the lagoon (15Lt) and rents tackle (4Lt per hour). It also transports bicycles across the lagoon for cyclists wanting to pedal only one way.

There are outlets with bicycles to hire around almost every street corner in Nida centre, including a couple run by **Lucia and Igoris Milunai** (☎ 8-682 14798; 9am-sunset May-Oct) midway along the lagoon promenade that runs parallel to Parnidis gatvė and on the path leading to Parnidis Dune. Count on paying 6Lt/10Lt per hour for a bicycle/children's buggy; cheaper day rates can be negotiated (up to 30Lt/50Lt per bike/buggy).

#### North of the Harbour

Breathtaking views of Parnidis Dune can be had at the harbour, from where a pleasant waterfront lagoon promenade stretches for over 1km to a flight of steps that leads up to the **Thomas Mann Memorial Museum** (Tomo Mano memorialinis muziejus; ☎ 52 260; www.mann.lt; adult/child 2/0.50Lt; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun Jun-Aug, 11am-5pm Tue-Sat Sep-May). The German writer spent just two summers with his wife and six children in the peacock-blue cottage between 1930 and 1932, before returning to Germany.

Back towards the town centre, a path leads to an 1888 red-brick **Evangelical-Lutheran Church** (Mass ☎ 11am Sun May-Sep). The church's peaceful woodland cemetery is pinpricked with *krikštai* – crosses carved from wood to help the deceased ascend to heaven more easily. Opposite is an **Amber Gallery Museum** (Gintaro galerija muzejus; ☎ 52 712; www.ambergallery.lt; Parnidis gatvė 20; ☎ 9am-9pm mid-Apr-Sep) with a small amber garden and fantastic pieces of amber jewellery. It runs a second gallery, **Kurėnas** (Naglių gatvė 18; ☎ 9am-9pm mid-Apr-Sep), in a striking glass box encased in an old wooden boat near the harbour.

B&W photographs of Nida in its more brutal spear-fishing, crow-biting days fill the thoughtfully laid-out **Neringa History Museum** (Neringos istorijos muzejus; ☎ 52 372; Parnidis gatvė 53; adult/child 2/1Lt; ☎ 10am-6pm Jun-mid-Sep, 10am-5pm Mon-Sat mid-Sep-May) where Nida's tale from the Stone Age to 1939 is told. Particularly brilliant are the shots of local hunters biting a crow's neck to kill the bird followed by a shot of vodka to kill the taste. Eating crows and seagulls' eggs was common on the spit in the 17th to 19th centuries, when continually drifting sands rendered previously arable land useless.

#### West of the Harbour

All westward routes lead to the beach. One way is to turn north off Taikos gatvė, opposite the post office. The street bends sharply left after 150m and climbs. A path leads up the hill to the 29.3m **Urbas Hill Lighthouse** (closed to visitors), atop the highest point in

the area. Continue 700m along the path behind the lighthouse to come out on a straight path that leads back down to the main road and, 400m beyond that, to the beach.

A less adventurous option is to follow Taikos gatvė westwards until it meets the main Smiltynė–Nida road, then continue in the same direction along a paved footpath (signposted) through pine forest until you hit sand.

### South of the Harbour

Heading south are two or three streets of fishing cottages with pretty flower-filled gardens. The **Ethnographic Fisherman's Museum** (Zejo etnografinė sodyba; ☎ 52 372; Naglių gatvė 4; adult/child 1lt; ☞ 10am–6pm May–Sep, 11am–5pm Tue–Sat Sep–May) is a peek at Nida in the 19th century, with original weathervanes decorating the garden, and rooms inside arranged as they were a couple of centuries ago.

Beyond Lotmiškio gatvė a path leads along the coastline and through a wooded area to a meadow at the foot of the **Parnidis Dune** (Parnidžio kopos), an unforested, 7km thread of golden sand that snakes south into Russia. In the meadow, dubbed 'Silence Valley', walkers can pick up the **Parnidis Cognitive Path** (Parnidžio pažintinis takas), a 1.8km nature trail with information panels highlighting dune flora and fauna. At the bottom of the flight of 180 steps, two dune photographs are displayed – one taken in 1960, the other in 2002. The difference in dune height – 20m in 40 years – is a warning to those keen to romp in the sand.

At the top of the spectacularly high bare dune, a panorama of sand, both coastlines, the forests to the north, and a mixture of sand and forests to the south is heart-stopping and unforgettable. Park authorities have left the smashed remains of the **granite sundial** that stood 12m tall atop the 52m dune peak until 1999 when a hurricane sent it crashing to the ground as a symbol of 'nature's uncontrollable forces' – another warning to wannabe sand rompers.

From here, the Kaliningrad border is 3km south – see the signs. If you stick to the designated wooden footpaths, you have no chance of wandering into Russia by mistake. From the dune, the Parnidis Cognitive Path continues past the lighthouse and pine forest to Taikos gatvė.

### SLEEPING

Prices in Nida fluctuate wildly between winter and summer; high-season prices (June, July and August) are listed here.

### Guesthouses

**Naglis** (☎ 51 124, 8-699 33682; www.naglis.lt; Naglių gatvė 12; d 200–250lt) This charming guesthouse in a wooden house between the market, main street and harbour is full of smiles. Doubles comprise two rooms, and most have a door opening out to the table-clad, tree-shaded garden. There's a dining room and kitchen for guests to share, one room has a fireplace and sauna (80Lt per hour), and the guest-house rents bikes (6Lt/2Lt per hour/day).

**Poilsis Nidojė** (☎ 31 698; www.neringahotels.lt; Naglių gatvė 11; d 200–250lt; ☒) Another wooden-house favourite, Poilsis Nidojė sports five spacious doubles and three two-room apartments with kitchen and fireplace. Interior design is rustic, an optional breakfast (20Lt) is served in the kitchen around a shared table and guests can cook up dinner on a barbecue in the pretty garden.

**Inkaro kaimas** (☎ 52 123; Naglių gatvė 26-1; d from 200lt; ☒) Blue pillars prop up this beautifully maintained red wooden house on the water's edge. The place dates from 1901 and a couple of pine-furnished rooms boast a balcony overlooking the lagoon. Look for the giant anchor in its small but sweet garden.

### THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

**Misko namas** (☎ 52 290; www.miskonamas.com; Pamario gatvė 11-2; d/ste from €33/74; ☒) This unpretentious guesthouse was a *poli-clinic* (outpatient facility) until 1991, when it was privatised to the workers. Among them was lovely Jovita, an enterprising woman who'd worked at the clinic for 18 years and who set about buying out her fellow workers from the business and transforming the traditional wooden house into the guesthouse of her dreams. Several years of jolly-hard work later, the result is an appealing sky-blue cottage laden with flower boxes and oozing charm. Every room has a fridge, sink and kettle and a couple have fully fledged kitchens and balconies. Guests can cook meals in a communal kitchen and Jovita is always on hand to help. Upon entering, note the original twisting wooden staircase.

**Vila Banga** (☎ 51 139, 8-686 08703; www.nidosbanga.lt; Pamario gatvė 2; d 230–280lt, apt 340–400lt) This pristine wooden house with bright-blue shutters and perfect thatched roof makes most visitors say 'Wow, look at that one!' It has seven comfortable rooms in its pine-wood interior. Prices include breakfast.

**Vandeja** (☎ 8-61467196, 8-655 21127; vandeja@forelle.lt; Naglių gatvė 17; d 120–200lt, apt 350–600lt; ☒) A dune view and a less snooty attitude are about the only things that could improve the enviable location of this luxurious wooden house, which has a couple of doubles and several small kitchen-equipped apartments in a separate building. Water is filtered, quality furnishings are modern and there is a sauna (100Lt per hour).

### Hotels

**Hotel Jūratė** (☎ 52 618; jurate-nida@takas.lt; Pamario gatvė 3; s/d 105/225lt; ☒) Hotel Jūratė's history is a colourful one, given its pride-of-place position on the spot where a Prussian post house stood from 1745. Burnt down in 1829, it was rebuilt as an inn, which survived until the mid-20th century. Soviet die-hards will be thrilled to know that the hotel's most recent face-lift didn't get rid of the kitsch glitter cement on the corridor walls. Austere rooms on the 3rd floor are not yet renovated.

**Auksinės Kopos** (☎ 52 387, 52 212; relita@klaipeda.omnitel.net; Kuverto gatvė 17; s/d 140/225lt; ☒) A Soviet-era rest home still going strong thanks to the tour groups who flock to Nida, Golden Dunes surprises with its cathedral-hall lobby, stylishly pebbled outdoor-pool area and cool, crisp rooms. Find it an uphill stroll from the centre amid pines.

### Camping

Wild camping can land you a 300Lt fine.

**Nidos Kempingas** (☎ 52 045, 8-682 41150; www.kempingas.lt; Taikos gatvė 45a; small/big tent 10/15Lt, adult/child/car 15/5/10Lt, d 180–200Lt, 2-/6-room studios with garden 250/450Lt; ☞ May–Sep; ☒ ☒) Set in pine forest at the foot of a path that leads to Parnidis Dune, this spruced-up camp site has accommodation to suit all budgets. Double rooms have satellite TV and fridge, and apartments are fully equipped for self-caterers.

### EATING

Opening hours follow the Nida standard: 10am to 10pm daily May or June to September. Out of season, little is open.

**Seklyčia** (☎ 50 000; Lotmiškio gatvė 1; meals 50–70Lt) There is nothing quite like sitting on the small terrace up top at this rust-coloured house to watch the sun sink behind the dune while wolfing down Curonian pike-perch in orange sauce or smoked eel.

**Feliksas** (Taikos gatvė 38; small/medium/large pizza from 6/9/18Lt) A hub of Nida nightlife, the former harbour building shelters an atmospheric pizzeria with a pavement terrace overlooking bobbing boats and a nightclub up top. In summer a sax and piano duo accompanies the 13 types of pizza served on the terrace.

**Užeiga Sena Sodyba** (☎ 52 782; Naglių gatvė 6; meals 30lt) Note the swans on the gables at this delightful wooden cottage restaurant where traditional Lithuanian fare can be enjoyed in a small flowery summer garden. Its June-time pancakes stuffed with the gills with fingernail-sized wild strawberries are gastronomic heaven.

**Laumė** (☎ 52 335; Pamario gatvė 24-3a; meals 20–40lt) Herrings with walnuts, smoked eel and pigs' ears are traditional Lithuanian delights to nibble on while taking in awesome views and fresh air on this delightful flower-bedecked terrace.

**Pastogė** (☎ 51 149; Kuverto gatvė 2) If Laumė is full, try Pastogė, its pretty sister. This place boasts an identical menu. Find both on the promenade skirting the lagoon.

**Ešerinė** (☎ 52 757; eserine@takas.lt; Naglių gatvė 2; meals 25–40lt) This odd but attractive Hawaiian-style wooden building with thatched roof pulls in the crowds with its vast waterfront terrace. Munch *fermentinis sūris* (cheese sticks) and watch the sun set behind Parnidis Dune.

Self-caterers are likely to give up gracefully after trying to shop at Nida's only **supermarket**

### SMELLS FISHY TO ME

And believe you me, it is. There is nothing fishier than the tasty choice of smoked fish waiting to be munched on in fine Curonian fashion at Nida's **smoked fish-outlet** (Rūkyta žuvis; Naglių gatvė 18; ☞ 10am–10pm May–Sep), next to the bus station. So you know what you're eating – *ungurys* is long slippery eel, *starkis* is pikeperch, *stinta* is smelt, *ešerys* is perch and flat round *karšis* is bream. Prices displayed, calculated by weight, are per fish.

(*Taikos gatvė*), a Soviet hand-me-down inside the *Prekybos Centras Gilija*, next to the *Agila Cultural Centre*. The one-stall market (opposite *Naglių gatvė 17*) sells plastic cups of wild strawberries, cranberries and other berries picked fresh from the forest.

#### ENTERTAINMENT

**Agila Cultural Centre** (*Taikos gatvė 4*) Discos, films, art exhibitions and other cultural events fill this centre adjoining the tourist office.

People don't come to Nida to party. Should you have the uncontrollable urge, try *Feliksas* (p369) or *Faksas* (☎ 8-698 33261; *Taikos gatvė 32a*), the only place to catch a live band.

#### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses use the **bus station** (☎ 54 859; *Naglių gatvė 20*). From Nida there are minibuses every half-hour to/from *Smiltynė* (7Lt, 1¼ hours) between 6am and 10pm (until 8pm from September to May), stopping en route in *Juodkrantė* (5Lt, 25 minutes); a couple daily to/from *Kaliningrad* (16.30Lt, three hours) and *Klaipėda bus station* (8Lt, 1½ hours); and one daily to/from *Kaunas* (44Lt, 3½ hours) and *Vilnius* (55Lt, six hours).

#### NEMUNAS DELTA

☎ 441

The low-lying, marsh-dotted eastern side of the *Curonian Lagoon* (*Kursių marios*) could be the end of the world. Remote and rural, tourism has scarcely touched this isolated landscape where summer skies offer magnificent views of the spit's white dunes across the lagoon. In winter ice-fishermen sit on the frozen lagoon – up to 12km wide in places – waiting for a smelt to bite.

The gateway into the extraordinary *Nemunas Delta* (*Nemuno Delta*), where the *Nemunas River* ends its 937km journey from its source in neighbouring *Belarus*, is **Šilutė** (population 25,000), a sleepy town 48km south of *Klaipėda*. The cluster of islands forms a savage but beautiful landscape protected since 1992 by the **Nemunas Delta Regional Park** (*Nemuno Deltos Regioninis Parkas*). One-fifth of the park is water – which freezes most winters, exposing hardy residents to extreme weather conditions. **Rusnė Island**, the largest island, covers 48 sq km and increases in size by 15cm to 20cm a year.

Boat is the main form of transport, villagers being transported in and out of the park by an amphibious tractor from *March* to mid-May, when merciless spring floods plunge about 5% of the park under water. In 1994 flood waters rose to 1.5m in places, although 40cm to 70cm is the norm. From Nida there are seasonal boats across the lagoon to the delta settlement of **Mingė** (also called *Minija* after the river that forms the main 'street' through the village). No more than 100 people live in *Mingė* – dubbed the *Venice of Lithuania* – and only two families still speak *Lietuvinkai*, an ethnic dialect of *Lithuanian* distinct to the delta. The 19th-century riverside houses are made of wood with reed roofs and are protected architectural monuments. A good way to explore this area is by bicycle; from *Mingė* a **cycling track** runs around **Lake Krokų Lanka**, the largest lake in the park at 4km long and 3.3km wide.

#### Information

Getting up-to-date information on this underfunded park is tantamount to squeezing

blood out of a stone. The **regional park headquarters** (☎ 75 050; p.deltosrp@takas.lt; *Lietuvinių gatvė 10*) in *Šilutė* is not officially open to visitors, but you might be able to persuade them otherwise. **Šilutė tourist office** (☎ 77 795; www.silute.lt; *Lietuvinių gatvė 10*; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri), on the ground floor of the same building, is totally unhelpful but does sell the indispensable *Rusnės sala* (*Rusnė Island*) map.

#### Sights & Activities

In the heart of the *Nemunas Delta* is **Rusnė**, 8km southwest of *Šilutė*, where the main stream divides into three: the *Atmata*, the *Pakalnė* and the *Skirvytė*. In this fishing village there's nothing to do except gawp at its two badly stocked food shops, regret not bringing a picnic to enjoy on its pretty riverbanks, and visit the tiny **Ethnographic Farmstead Museum** (*Etnografinė Sodyba Muziejus*; admission by donation; ☎ variable), signposted 1.8km from the village. Exhibitions of tools, furnishings and farm buildings reflect the harsh face of delta life centuries ago – and today.

Dike-protected polders (land reclaimed from the sea) cover the park, the first polder being built in 1840 to protect *Rusnė*. The red-brick **water-pumping station** (1907) near the **lighthouse** (*švyturys*) in *Uostadvaris*, 8km from the bridge in *Rusnė*, can be visited upon request; you can swim in the river from the small beach here. Many lower polders are still flooded seasonally and serve as valuable spawning grounds for various fish species (there are some 60 in the park).

**Ventės Ragas** ('world's edge') is a sparsely inhabited area on the south-pointing promontory of the delta, which, with its dramatic nature and uplifting isolation, is beautifully wild. A Teutonic Order castle was built here in the 1360s to protect shipping, only for it to collapse within a couple of hundred years due to severe storms on this isolated point. The church was rebuilt, only to be storm-wrecked again in 1702. Its stones were used to build a new church at **Kintai**, 10km north on the regional park's northeastern boundary. Bar a few fishers' houses and the lighthouse (1862), the main attraction here is the **Ventės Ragas Ornithological Station** (☎ 54 480; adult/child 2/1Lt; ☎ 10am-5pm Jun-Sep, 10am-5pm Mon-Fri Oct-May), 66km south of *Klaipėda* at the end of the *Kintai-Ventė* road. The first bird-ringing station was established here in 1929, but it was not until 1959 to 1960 that large

bird traps were installed. Today, one million birds pass through the station each migratory period, zigzag, snipe, cobweb and duck traps ensnaring birds to be ringed. Two exhibition rooms inside the station explain the birdlife (p371) and an observation deck encourages visitors to spot species first-hand. **Vytas** (☎ 68 541, 8-617 78410; vros@takas.lt) is a local English-speaking ornithological guide.

#### Sleeping & Eating

Campers can pitch tents at designated spots in the park – the regional park office can tell you where – but bring food provisions with you. Farm accommodation organised by the regional park is an exhilarating way to experience delta life; beds cost around 30Lt a night and a delicious dinner can be cooked for a little extra. *Šilutė's* only hotel is too grim to mention.

**Kintai** (☎ 47 339, 8-686 70490; www.kintai.lt; d/tr 140/180Lt, 5-bedded room 300Lt; P) The top spot to stay in the delta, this hotel-restaurant and boating complex entertains guests with awesome views and total peace bar the sweet sound of fish biting and oars dipping in lake water. Carp is the main catch. You can rent a boat to motor around the *Curonian Lagoon* and seven doubles (140Lt) float on a boat. Find *Kintai* 6km east of *Kintai* village on the *Minija* River.

**Ventainė** (☎ 47 422, 8-686 70490; www.ventaine.lt; Ventės Ragas; adult/car/tent 10/8/8Lt, d 160Lt, with shared bathroom 100Lt, lux d 310Lt; P) This complex, a two-minute walk from the ringing station, sits on the lagoon shore. Comfy villa rooms have fridge and heated bathroom floors, and campers are well catered for with wooden huts, camp sites and a clean, modern shower/toilet block. A traditional sauna (80Lt per two hours) sits on the water's edge and eel soup (13Lt) is served on the café terrace.

**Laimutės** (☎ 59 690; www.silec.lt/laimute; d/apt Oct-Mar 80/120Lt, Jun-Aug 100/150Lt; P) About 15km east of *Šilutė* in *Žemaičių Naumiestis*, this 16-room guesthouse slumbers between forest and lake. Facilities include a sauna, bicycle and riverboat rental (free to guests, 10Lt an hour to everyone else) and it arranges boat trips, summer and winter lake fishing, horse riding, berrying and mushrooming.

#### Getting There & Around

Getting to the area without your own wheels is tough. In summer *Šilutė* is served by 10

#### NEMUNAS BIRDLIFE

This wetland is a twitcher's heaven. Some 270 of the 325 bird species found in Lithuania frequent the *Nemunas Delta* Regional Park, many rare birds breeding in the lush marshes around *Rusnė*, including rare black storks, white-tailed eagles, black-tailed godwits, pintails, dunlin, ruff and great snipe. The common white stork breeds like there's no tomorrow in *Ventė*.

The Arctic-European-East African bird migration flight path cuts through the park, making it a key spot for migratory waterfowl. But it's not just a stopover or feeding site – the park is a breeding ground for 169 species of birds, and some, such as the pintail, don't breed anywhere else in Lithuania.

Rare aquatic warblers, corncrakes, black-headed gulls, white-winged black terns and great crested grebes have their biggest colonies in the delta. In autumn up to 200,000 birds – 80% of which are tits and finches – fly overhead at any one time in the *Ventės Ragas* Ornithological Station sky, and up to 5000 are ringed each day for research into world migration.

buses a day to/from Klaipėda (6.50Lt), five to/from Kaunas (20.50Lt, 180km) and four to/from Vilnius (32Lt, 280km).

Boats are the best means of exploring the delta (it's 8km from Pakalnė to Kintai by boat but 45km by road). The main routes follow the three main delta tributaries – the Atmata (13km), Skirvytė (9km) and Pakalnė (9km) Rivers – which fan out westwards from Rusnė.

Kintai, Ventainė and Laimutės rent boats with a boatman-guide. The park office in Šilutė might be able to help.

## LITHUANIA DIRECTORY

For regional information pertaining to all three countries, see the Regional Directory.

### ACTIVITIES

Lithuanians love nature. People were still worshipping ancient oak trees a mere six centuries ago, and these days in their free time they make regular pilgrimages to their country's many luscious lakes and forests.

Boating, berrying, mushrooming, bird-watching and ballooning are uplifting pursuits. Travellers can cycle into the wilderness, sweat in traditional lakeside saunas and enjoy ice-fishing or skiing.

For more details see the Activities chapter and individual destinations.

### CUSTOMS

For pointers on customs regulations, see p385. The **Lithuanian Customs Department** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 5-266 6166; www.cust.lt; Jakšto gatvė 1/25) in Vilnius has online updates.

From outside the EU you can import duty-free into Lithuania: 1L of spirits, 2L of wine or champagne, 3L of beer and 200 cigarettes or 250g of tobacco. Meat and dairy products cannot be brought in as hand luggage from outside the EU. Upon entering, you must declare foreign currency in cash above 10,000Lt, and above 5000Lt when exiting.

When travelling within the EU, there are no restrictions on what you can take in and out of Lithuania providing it's for personal use – with the exception of cigarettes, which are limited to 200 when leaving Lithuania for Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Sweden and the UK.

Lithuania limits amber exports, but a few souvenirs should be okay providing the value doesn't exceed 3500Lt. You need a Culture Ministry permit, and pay 10% to 20% duty, to export artworks over 50 years old. Contact the **Committee of Cultural Heritage** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 5-272 4005; Snipiskų gatvė 3, Vilnius) for info.

### EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

#### Lithuanian Embassies & Consulates

Find a complete list of Lithuanian diplomatic representations at the **Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs** (www.urm.lt). They include the following:

**Belarus** Minsk (☎ 017-285 24 48; ulitsa Zacharova 68, 220088 Minsk)

**Canada** Ottawa (☎ 613-567 5458; www.lithuanianembassy.ca; 130 Albert St, Suite 204, Ottawa, Ontario K1P 5G4)

**Czech Republic** Prague (☎ 02-57 21 01 22; amb.cz@urm.lt; Pod Klíkovkou 1916/2, 1500 Prague 5)

**Denmark** Copenhagen (☎ 39-63 62 07; Bernstorffsvej 214, DK-2920 Charlottelund, Copenhagen)

**Estonia** Tallinn (☎ 631 4030/4053; www.hot.ee/lietambasada; Uus tänav 15, 0100 Tallinn)

**Finland** Helsinki (☎ 09-608 210; embassy@liettua.pp.fi; Rauhankatu 13a, 00170 Helsinki)

**France** Paris (☎ 01 40 54 50 50; www.amb-lituanie-paris.fr; 22 Blvd de Courcelles, 75017 Paris)

**Germany** Berlin (☎ 030-890 68 10; www.botschaft-litauen.de; Charitéstr 9, 10711 Berlin)

**Ireland** Dublin (☎ 01-668 8292; 90 Merrion Rd, Ballsbridge, Dublin 4)

**Israel** Tel Aviv (☎ 3-695 8685; Top Shaul Hameleh Blvd 8, Amot Mishpat Bldg, Tel Aviv 64733)

**Latvia** Riga (☎ 732 1519; lithemb@ltemb.vip.lv; Rūpniecības iela 24, 1010 Riga)

**Netherlands** The Hague (☎ 070-385 54 18; http://amb.urm.lt; Koninginnegracht 78, 2514 AH The Hague)

**Norway** Oslo (☎ 221-292 00; Drammensveien 40, Oslo 0244)

**Poland** Warsaw (☎ 02-625 33 68; www.lietuva.pl; aleje Szucho 5, 00-580 Warsaw)

**Russia** Kaliningrad (☎ 0112-957 688; kons.kaliningradas@urm.lt; Proletarskaja 133, Kaliningrad); Moscow

(☎ 095-785 8605; Borisoglebsky per 10, 121069 Moscow); St Petersburg (☎ 812-327 02 30; st.peterburgas@peterstar.ru; Rylejeva ulitsa 37, 191123 St Petersburg)

**UK** London (☎ 020-7486 6401/2; http://lithuania.embassyhomepage.com; 84 Gloucester Place, London W1U 6AU)

**USA** Chicago (☎ 312-397 0382; kons.cikaga@urm.lt; 211 E Ontario St, Suite 1500, Chicago, IL 60611); New York

(☎ 212-354 7840; info@ltoncsny.org; 420 Fifth Ave, New York, NY 10018); Washington DC (☎ 202-234 5860; www.litembassy.org; 2622 16th St NW, Washington, DC 20009)

### PRACTICALITIES

- The *Baltic Times* (www.baltictimes.com) is published every Thursday, and has an entertainment guide that includes cinema listings.
- Listen to the BBC World Service 24 hours a day at 100.5 FM.
- For national news, pick up the most popular independent daily *Lietuvos Rytas* (www.lrytas.lt), its tabloid counterpart *Respublika* or quality business daily *Verzlio Žinios* (www.vz.lt).
- Lithuanian Airlines in-flight magazine *Lithuania in the World*, sold in Vilnius bookshops (p290), is a brilliant source for insightful features on cultural and current affairs.
- Tune into state-run Lithuanian Radio (102.6 FM); M1 (106.8 FM; www.m-1.fm) for news and views; commercial channel Radiocentras (101.5 FM); or M1 Plus (106.2FM) for non-stop music.
- Public broadcaster Lithuanian TV (www.lrt.lt) puts up a good fight with LTV and its culture-driven Channel 2 against the stiff competition posed by the commercial channels, among them TV3 (www.tv3.lt), popular for American films, soaps and concerts; and TV4 (www.tv4.lt).
- Buy or watch videos on the PAL system.
- Plugs have two round pins; the electric current is 220V, 50Hz.
- Use the metric system for weights and measures.

### Embassies & Consulates in Lithuania

Foreign embassies in Vilnius include the following:

**Australia** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 5-212 3369, emergency 8-687 11117; australia@consulate.lt; Vilniaus gatvė 23)

**Belarus** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 5-266 2200; www.belarus.lt; Mindaugo gatvė 13)

**Canada** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 5-249 0950; www.canada.lt; Jogailos gatvė 4)

**Denmark** (Map pp288-9; ☎ 5-264 8760; www.denmark.lt; Kosciuskos gatvė 36)

**Estonia** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 5-278 0200; www.estemb.lt; Mickevičiaus gatvė 4a)

**Finland** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 5-212 1621; www.finland.lt; Klaipėdos gatvė 6)

**France** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 5-212 2979; www.amba-france.lt.org; Švarco gatvė 1)

**Germany** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 5-210 6400; www.vilnius.dilpo.de; Sierakausko gatvė 24)

**Latvia** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 5-213 1260; embassy.lithuania@mfa.gov.lv; Čiurlionio gatvė 76)

**Netherlands** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 5-269 0072; www.netherlandsembassy.lt; Jogailos gatvė 4)

**Norway** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 5-261 0000; www.norvegija.lt; Mėsinių gatvė 5/2)

**Poland** (Map pp288-9; ☎ 5-270 9001; ambpol@tdd.lt; Smėlio gatvė 20a)

**Russia** (Map pp288-9; ☎ 5-272 1763; www.lithuania.mid.ru; Latvijų gatvė 53/54)

**UK** (Map pp288-9; ☎ 5-246 2900; www.britain.lt; Antakalnio gatvė 2)

**USA** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 5-266 5500; www.usembassy.lt; Akmenų gatvė 6)

### FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Lithuania's most important cultural events include its national song festival (the next will be in 2007; p32), midsummer celebrations and the Baltika Folklore Festival (p386). The State Department of Tourism (p391) posts a complete list online. Key dates:

#### February

**Horse Race** First Saturday of the month; on Lake Sartai in Dusetos, near Utena, if the lake is frozen, or in the town.

**Užgavėnės** Animal, bird and beast masquerades in towns and villages of Žemaitija to celebrate Mardi Gras.

#### March

**St Casimir's Day** Held on 4 March. Lithuania's patron saint's day, with the Kaziukas crafts fair in Vilnius around this date.

**Birštonas Jazz Festival** Held late March in even-numbered years. Three-day jazz event, with top Lithuanian and foreign musicians.

#### April

**Kaunas International Jazz Festival** Four-day festival, with acts in Kaunas and Vilnius, attracting top jazz musicians from all over the world.

#### July

**Vilnius Summer Music Festival** A week-long summer festival of street theatre, dancing, masked parades and craft fairs in the streets of Vilnius' Old Town.

**Žemaičių Kalvarija Church Festival** First week of the month. Thousands of pilgrims from all over Lithuania

flock to the Žemaičių Kalvarija to celebrate this week-long church festival.

**Klaipėda Sea Festival** Late July. Celebrations in the port city.

### August

**Visagino Country** (www.visagino-country.lt) Two-day international country-and-western music festival in Visaginas, mid-August.

### September

**Vilnius City Days** Mid-month. Three days of musical and cultural events in theatres, concert halls and the streets of Vilnius.

### October

**Vilnius Jazz Festival** One of Eastern Europe's leading contemporary jazz gatherings, held in the capital city.

### November

**Vėlinės (All Souls' Day)** Held on 2 November. Commemoration of the dead, with visits to cemeteries.

## HOLIDAYS

Lithuania also celebrates such days as the Day of the Lithuanian Flag (1 January), St Casimir's Day (4 March), Earth Day (20 March), Partisans' Day (fourth Sunday in May), Black Ribbon Day (23 August) and the Genocide Day of Lithuanian Jews (23 September). People still work on these days, but the national flag flutters outside most public buildings and private homes.

### Public holidays

**New Year's Day** 1 January

**Independence Day** (Nepriklausomybės diena) 16 February; anniversary of 1918 independence declaration

**Lithuanian Independence Restoration Day** 1 March

**Good Friday**

**Easter Monday**

**International Labour Day** 1 May

**Mothers' Day** First Sunday in May

**Feast of St John (Midsummer)** 24 June

**Statehood Day** 6 July; commemoration of coronation of Grand Duke Mindaugas, 13th century

**Assumption of Blessed Virgin** 15 August

**All Saints' Day** 1 November

**Christmas** (Kalėdos) 25, 26 December

## INTERNET ACCESS

Internet cafés grow like mushrooms (as they say in Lithuania!) in Vilnius (2.50Lt to 8Lt per hour). Outside the capital, prices are higher and speeds are slower. In remote

areas such as the Nemunas Delta in western Lithuania the whole concept is nonexistent.

Most top-end hotels and a good few mid-range places advertise free or paying hook-up in hotel rooms. What is actually meant by hook-up varies enormously, though. Many simply have a telephone plug in the room, which, if you have a laptop, you can use to dial up using your modem, access number etc. Others will provide the cable if you have the laptop. Many hotels (as well as Vilnius airport and Vokiečių gatvė in Vilnius) are wi-fi zones, allowing you to hook-up wirelessly for free or a small fee. A complete listing of wi-fi hot spots can be found on www.wifi.lt.

A couple of top-end hotels in Vilnius and Kaunas have computer-equipped business centres for guests to use at a fairly substantial fee. Many budget and midrange places, meanwhile, have a computer terminal in the lobby, on which guests can surf for free.

## INTERNET RESOURCES

Useful general Baltic websites are on p15. Recommended sites pertaining solely to Lithuania include the following:

**Countryside Vacation in Lithuania** (www.countryside.lt) Key site for booking farm and homestay accommodation in rural Lithuania or contacting local folk artists.

**Entertainment Bank** (Pramagos Lietuvoje; www.eb.lt) Entertainment and culture website, jammed with invaluable info on what's happening when across the entire country; eating, drinking and Lithuania with kids too.

**European Information Centre** (www.eic.lrs.lt)

Lithuania in Europe! Read all about it.

**Lithuania** (www.lietuva.lt) Information portal packed with useful links.

**Lithuania Statistics** (www.std.lt) Crunch figures with the national statistics office.

**Lithuania Travel Information** (www.travel.lt) Precisely what its name says; set up by the Lithuanian Tourism Fund.

**Litrail** (www.litrail.lt) Train timetable and information by Lithuanian Railways.

**Parliament of Lithuania** (www.lrs.lt) Read all about the latest laws.

**President of Lithuania** (www.lrp.lt) Brush up on who's ruling the country.

**Toks** (www.toks.lt) Comprehensive national and international bus information.

## MAPS

For regional maps, see p388. For Lithuania nothing can beat the interactive and searchable maps covering the entire country at **Maps.lt** (www.maps.lt).

In print, Lithuania is best covered by the *Lietuva* (1:400,000) road map, published by Vilnius-based map publisher **Briedis** (www.briedis.lt; Parodu gatvė 4, LT-04133 Vilnius) and sold by the publisher online. Bookshops, tourist offices and supermarkets in Lithuania sell it for 8Lt.

For stress-free navigation buy Jaņa sēta's *miesto planas* (city maps) covering Vilnius, Kaunas and Klaipėda at a scale of 1:25,000, with a 1:10,000 inset of the centre, and Palanga (1:15,000), Šiauliai and Panevėžys (1:20,000). They cost 6Lt to 8Lt apiece in bookshops and some tourist offices.

## MONEY

The Lithuanian litas (Lt) will remain firmly in place until at least 2007 when Lithuania could possibly trade in its litas for the euro (p22). Some hotels and restaurants already list prices in euros as well as litų, but payment is still in litų only.

The litas (plural: litų or litai) is divided into 100 centai (singular: centas). It comes in note denominations of 10Lt, 20Lt, 50Lt, 100Lt, 200Lt and 500Lt and coins of 1Lt, 2Lt and 5Lt alongside the virtually worthless centai coins. Since 2002 the litas has been pegged to the euro at a fixed rate of 3.45Lt; see the inside front cover for exchange rates. For seven years previously, the US dollar served as the peg.

## POST

Lithuania's postal system (www.post.lt) is quick and cheap. Letters/postcards cost 1.70Lt/1.20Lt internationally and 1Lt/0.80Lt domestically. Mail to the USA takes about 10 days, to Europe about a week. State-run EMS is the cheapest express mail service; find it in Vilnius at the central post office (p291).

## TELEPHONE

Lithuania's digitised telephone network, run by **Lietuvos Telekomas** (Lithuanian Telecom; www.telecom.lt), is quick and efficient, although knowing what code to dial can be confusing.

To call other cities within Lithuania, dial ☎ 8, wait for the tone, then dial the area code and telephone number.

To make an international call from Lithuania, dial ☎ 00 followed by the country code.

To call Lithuania from abroad, dial Lithuania's country code (☎ 370), the area code and telephone number.

Then of course there are mobile telephones. No self-respecting Lithuanian would be seen without a mobile surgically attached to their ear, and indeed, many a hotel and restaurant – especially in more rural parts – lists a mobile telephone as its main number. Mobile numbers comprise a three-digit code and a five-digit number.

To call a mobile within Lithuania, dial ☎ 8 followed by the three-digit code and mobile number. To call a mobile from abroad, dial ☎ 370 followed by the three-digit code and mobile number. This guide lists full mobile numbers, ie ☎ 8-xxx xxxxx.

Mobile companies **Bitė** (www.bite.lt), **Omnitel** (www.omnitel.lt) and **Tele 2** (www.tele2.lt) sell prepaid SIM cards; Tele2 is only one to offer free roaming with its prepaid cards, making it the best choice for those travelling in Estonia, Latvia and Poland too.

Public telephones – increasingly rare given the widespread use of mobiles – are blue and only accept phonecards, sold in denominations of 50/75/100/200 units for 9/13/16/30Lt at newspaper kiosks.

## TOURIST INFORMATION

Most towns have a tourist office with staff who usually speak at least a little English. Tourist offices range from the superbly helpful, useful and obliging to the downright useless and are coordinated by the Vilnius-based **State Department of Tourism** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 5-210 8796; www.tourism.lt; Juozapavičiaus gatvė 13). For a list of its representatives overseas, see p391. Details of tourist offices in cities and towns are given in the Information sections throughout the chapter.

For more info on Lithuania's three Unesco World Heritage sights – Neringa, Vilnius' Old Town and the fine tradition of cross crafting – visit the Vilnius-based **Lithuanian National Commission for Unesco** (Map pp292-3; ☎ 5-210 7340; www.unesco.lt; Šv Jono gatvė 11, Vilnius).

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